

**9th Mediterranean Conference of the
Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Cairo, 24 May 2004**

**Opening Address
H.E. Dr Mohammed Al-Hadid**

Chairman, Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Your Excellency, Mrs Suzanne Mubarak
President of the Egyptian Red Crescent
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Red Cross, Red Crescent friends,

Thank you for the invitation to this 9th Mediterranean RCRC Conference. I'm honoured to be here with all of you tonight addressing your Conference on behalf of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement.

The Standing Commission has always put an emphasis on the importance of such meetings, where it has the opportunity to have an open dialogue and consult with representatives of our Movement on all levels and in all regions. We make an effort to seek the views and opinions from the NS to assist us and to ensure we know the realities on the ground in which NS carry out the work. Our working groups have representatives from 30 NS. We value their advise on issues ranging from the emblem, the Movement Strategy to the Seville Agreement and preparations of coming statutory meetings. Just last week, the Seville group met for the 1st time and decided to call on all NS to provide it with their experiences from the Agreement to be able to address the issue of better implementation of this crucially important Movement tool.

We are committed to strengthen our credibility internally and externally by ensuring that all decisions taken at our statutory meetings in partnership with our governments and other collaborators are implemented.

We will promote, encourage and find ways together with other components of this great Movement to live up to challenges we face as a humanitarian Movement. The challenges of yesterday are not those of today. We need to continuously modify the way we work, the way we respond to the needs of the victims so we remain the leading humanitarian force and stay relevant.

We will, as independent and neutral actors – at times and when needed – also put pressure on our partners to live up to their humanitarian commitments and obligations!

Last December we met with our governments at the 28th International Conference under the theme of Protecting Human Dignity.

This touches the core of our fundamental principles and the humanitarian values we believe in and want to follow. We have to fight discrimination and intolerance in all possible forms - cultural, political, religious, economic, ethnic and gender. Respect for diversity, tolerance and non-discrimination are keys to promoting a better understanding locally, nationally, regionally and internationally. I want to remind you, governments and National Societies, of the commitments you made at that Conference.

Together we adopted a strong Declaration for protecting human dignity – It addresses some of the most pressing humanitarian challenges facing the world today. I will cite some of these commitments.

We reaffirm the principles and rules of International Humanitarian Law and commit to increase respect for humanitarian principles and values, to promote tolerance, non-discrimination and respect for diversity among all peoples. But as stated by the President of the ICRC and member of the Standing Commission, Jakob Kellenberger, recently:

«Events in Iraq and other recent armed conflicts have time and again reminded us that the essential dignity of human beings is often among the first casualties of war. To tackle violations of international humanitarian law committed in armed conflicts, simply paying lip service to the protection of human life and dignity is not enough»

We commit to disseminate IHL to armed forces and to the civilian population in collaboration with - amongst others - media and religious institutions. We agree to ensure respect for civilians in all kinds of conflicts and unrest, in particular concerning women and children, and to respect the cultural heritage of all people.

Regarding new security threats, we confirmed that IHL is applicable to all situations of armed conflict and foreign occupation. We condemn all acts or threats of violence aimed at spreading terror among civilian populations. As we renounce all acts or threats of violence against humanitarian workers; they must be respected and protected in all circumstances to be able to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

We committed to reduce the impact and risk of disasters by integrating disaster risk reduction into all national and international planning and policy instruments. When disasters strike, we agreed to implement all appropriate legal, policy and operational measures to facilitate and effectively respond to them.

To do all this, we adopted an Agenda for Humanitarian Action, which in detail outlines a working programme for the next 4 years. It contains a total of 65 action points supporting the four general objectives dealing with the missing, weapons, disaster reduction and health issues, notably HIV/AIDS – which is one of the themes at your Conference.

Protecting human dignity requires us to raise health standards and reduce health risks through comprehensive prevention, treatment and care measures, and to provide access to medicines at affordable prices.

Today's young people are the AIDS generation. They have never known a world without HIV/AIDS. Millions have already perished. Stopping HIV/AIDS requires comprehensive strategies that focus on youth.

Over 60 million people have been infected with HIV in the past 20 years. Half of them became infected between the ages of 15 – 24. Today nearly 12 million young people are living with HIV/AIDS. Such statistics underscore the urgent need to address HIV/AIDS amongst youth. We have to act now, we have to develop strategies to address HIV/AIDS as controlling the disease will ensure that today's young people will have a chance of being tomorrow's adults.

These strategies should include education, changing social norms, providing youth friendly services and reaching out programmes where RC/RC youth are active in their communities; promoting the condom and - most importantly – getting leaders such as teachers, sports personalities, performers to speak out about the crisis as youth often model their behaviour on their idols.

As for violence and youth, another of your themes, we have to admit that children are more aggressive and grow up more likely to become involved in violent acts either as victimiser or as a victim if they themselves witness violent acts. Drugs and alcohol often contribute to violent actions.

Violence is a learnt behaviour, often at home or in the community. Rather than waiting for violence to be learnt and practised, it would be more effective to devote our attention to prevention programmes and to teach the youth skills to arrive at non-violent solutions to problems such as problem solving, stress management, assertiveness, anger and impulse control.

We agreed at the International Conference in December that stigma and discrimination can kill – not only people affected by HIV/AIDS and other diseases but also others by contributing to uncertainty, increased vulnerability and to the evolution of conflict ultimately resulting in violent situations.

In closing, I wish your conference success and concrete resolutions that will have an impact on reshaping the communities we are serving. Youth are the future leaders. They have always been involved in our programmes. With all the challenges facing the youth today, we need to plan for strategies focused on youth now more than ever. Let us join forces to make the future a better world for our children. Action speaks louder than words.

Thank you.