

**10th Mediterranean Conference of the
Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Athens 27-30 March 2007**

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

Chairman, Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

It is a pleasure for me to be here with you this morning in beautiful Athens. Thank you for the invitation, which gives me the valuable opportunity to be with you at a moment in time, when we again are preparing for important statutory meetings later this year. I was particularly pleased to see that the main issues on your agenda relate to migration and partnership. The very same ones that the Standing Commission has put at the centre of the coming International Conference, where the Movement meets with its most important partners: the States.

The slogan for the coming Conference – “Together for humanity” – was adopted for a reason: It is our firm belief that the challenges ahead of mankind cannot be addressed by States alone – or by us as a global Movement and part of Civil Society. These challenges demand that we join forces, work in cooperation and partnership for lasting results.

That is why we propose that the Conference seeks to define and agree on some of the most important humanitarian challenges we will face in the coming years so we can set an agenda for the Movement. We suggest that the humanitarian consequences of some of the most pressing current developments, among them migration, be analysed with a view to develop action based partnerships between National Societies and States.

Other such phenomena for analysis are environmental hazards, violence and emerging health threats. I must stress that the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement is not concerned with passing judgement on the reasons behind these developments; our sole concern is and should remain the humanitarian consequences and the vulnerabilities they create for millions of people around the globe. And it is in the light of these consequences that we have to act and open our

eyes as to what is going on around us or awaiting us.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, one of the defining global issues of the early twenty-first century is migration. More and more people are on the move today than at any other time in human history. They estimate that close to 200 million people are today living outside their place of birth. This amounts to about 3% of the world's population or the equivalent of one in every thirty-five persons. Moreover, migration is not slowing down, on the contrary; it is expected to grow by about 3 % annually.

There are a number of reasons for people to migrate – and not all of them are negative or problematic. Economic liberalization as well as economic decline have both led people to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Demographic changes in many countries in the economically advanced world will in the coming years require immigration to be able to secure production and keep growth on track.

For us humanitarians, it is not difficult to understand why people from the poorer regions wish to migrate to more prosperous countries. People have always moved within regions or from one region to another in order to improve their standard of living, to give their children better opportunities or to escape from poverty, war, and famine. This “iron rule of migration” has governed since the beginning of time. Today it is not only the poor who choose to leave. Globalization and spread of international business have created an increasing demand also for experienced professionals.

Opening the High Level Dialogue on migration last September in New York, Kofi Annan said that “Migration is a courageous expression of an individual's will to overcome adversity and live a better life”. He also stated that more and more people understand that governments can cooperate to create triple wins—for migrants, for their countries of origin, and for the societies that receive them. We only have to consider the remittances that migrants send to their families back home: they reached a staggering 167 billion dollars last year; an amount that exceeds the total of all international aid combined.

But – migration has its dark sides – human trafficking. What is of great concern is the fact that a significant number of women are victims of forced movement. Trafficking for sexual purposes is second only to drugs in its economic value to organised crime, as noted in the report by the IOM-UNFPA expert group report on female migrants. The report further states that about half of all migrants – 91 million in 2005 – are women. But equal numbers do not mean equal treatment. Women have fewer opportunities than men for legal migration; many become irregular migrants with lack of support and exposure to risk. They are more vulnerable than men to violence and exploitation. Another sad fact according to a 2006 State Department study around 50% of people smuggled and sold into forced work are minors that end up working in the sex trade.

Last weekend saw the 200th anniversary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807. In commemoration of that Antonio Maria Costa, Director of the UN office on drugs and crime wrote in the International Herald Tribune that “Whatever history and law books tell us, slavery has not been abolished. It is a booming international trade, making billions of dollars at the expense of millions of victims. People are still deprived of their liberty, duped or coerced into forced labour, locked up, abused and forced into servitude.” (Unquote)

This is what should concern us as a RCRC Movement. These vulnerable people, trafficked and irregular migrants, are all around us, in the rich western countries as well as elsewhere. And it is not only about finding them and offering them assistance and support. We have all seen the great work that for example the Spanish Red Cross does in this regard. We also face a real challenge in advocating for better development, to draw attention of governments and public opinion to the plight of these people, to raise our voice for improved livelihoods that could prevent the already vulnerable from insecure ventures in an often desperate pursuit of a better future, where they risk losing their lives or becoming victims of modern slavery.

Discrimination cannot be separated from a discussion on migration. I dearly encourage you to reflect on how our Movement can effectively fight the spread and increase of racism, discrimination and xenophobia against people of different cultures and beliefs, against migrants but also against other people, who are marginalised for various reasons. Looking around the Mediterranean, at the environment in which we work in this diverse region, I find this challenge very important. Part of our mission is to defend human dignity. In the migration debate, emphasis should be put on the richness that different people and cultures bring along to their new home lands and communities. The starting point can be our own National Societies: are we genuinely opening our doors to others?

When we meet our governments at the International Conference in November, we should be clear about what we want in terms of partnership with them when it comes to migration. The dialogue within the UN has called for better development policies and planning that would not only integrate migration issues but seek to prevent at least economically forced migration. Our task, within our global mission, is to assist the most vulnerable amongst us and to try to prevent further vulnerabilities.

Friends,

I wish you success in your deliberations analysing the various aspects of migration.

And I look forward to the outcomes that can feed into our preparations for the Conference by focusing on issues and aspects from a distinct National Society point of view that we can take up in our partnership-dialogue with governments.

Thank you.