

General Assembly of the Organisation of
Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies
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It is a pleasure for me to participate at this General Assembly of Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies. The meeting comes at an optimal time of the year, allowing us to discuss and prepare how best to address the new and grave challenges, which are on the agenda of the International Conference and the Council of Delegates later this year. It also coincides with a wave of developments in your own region, which call on the Red Crescent and the Red Cross Societies to respond and follow the Movement's basic mission: to assist the most vulnerable people, those most in need, without questioning the cause for their distress. In recent months it has been gratifying from a Movement point of view to see the high degree of acceptance and the strict adherence to our Fundamental Principles that the National Societies have demonstrated in the countries now faced with internal challenges.

It is not a question of this or that National Society acting in isolation. When assisting even in its own country, the Society is part of the Movement performing, underpinning the unity, the principles and the understanding that we are one. We are all part of the same extended family, whether we are Crosses or Crescents and regardless where we are in action.

Acting in unity will be important for us at the Conference in November. Credibility comes through action, not words. When you return home from this meeting, you will find the convocation to the Council as well as the Conference, the provisional agendas and the explanatory background documents to the themes and issues for debate and decision.

As you already know, the general objective of the 31st Conference is to *strengthen International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian action*. We hope to reach this objective by addressing four clusters of topical challenges.

IHL is one focus area, looking at greater compliance with existing legal frameworks and at ensuring better protection by reinforcement or development of the law in specific areas, notably protection of persons deprived of liberty and better implementation of international humanitarian law.

Another focus area is the gaps in disaster laws, in other words, the need to promote and develop national legislation on facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief based on the IDRL guidelines adopted in 2007. A further concern is provision of shelter in major natural disasters, which touches on basic human needs and vulnerabilities.

A third block of issues concerns health challenges. Violence, or threats of violence, in health care in armed conflict and other situations of violence, is a major under-recognised humanitarian challenge today. It affects vulnerable people directly as well as providers of health services. Another major cause for vulnerability is unequal access to health services affecting, amongst others, large migrant populations and non- documented migrants in particular.

Strengthening local humanitarian action is the fourth focus area, seeking recognition for volunteers and volunteerism and strengthening National Societies, their legal as well as their

resource base. Both are essential for our abilities to work and address the needs of vulnerable populations.

In this context we also want to talk about the Movement as an agent for promoting a culture of peace and tolerance. Much of the hardening attitudes we see develop especially in Europe but also elsewhere and the hostility towards other cultures and religions essentially grow out of fear; fears of the unfamiliar and the extraordinary. As a global Movement that reaches all corners of the world and all peoples, we are well placed to deal with issues at the core of such fears. We have even acknowledged this important area in our basic principle of impartiality.

The future belongs to the young people. They have been a driving force also in the recent developments in this region. We have to reach out to the youth, with our message of tolerance and non-discrimination, which lies at the heart of peace and cooperation, to build a more human world.

I will not go into details of these major areas of work at the Conference – with one exception, in a minute.

I do, however, encourage you to carefully study the provisional agenda and the background documents, which you will receive in the coming days. The Standing Commission will in September finalise the draft agenda and the working documents of both the Council and the Conference. You have until end of August the opportunity to react, and I urge you to do so. It is important that we listen to the National Societies for better ownership of the Conference and to ensure relevance of the issues we deal with. This wish was clearly expressed by all Societies consulted in the Standing Commission – led work on our Movement fora. The Standing Commission is prepared to listen but that entails reaction and initiatives by you, the National Societies.

Now to the exception: The Standing Commission is committed to see the Israeli-Palestinian MoU implemented well ahead of the up-coming Conference. At our last meeting, we heard the Monitor, Mr Stenbäck, who presently is in the region again. While much progress has been made by all involved, we still face some challenges that I hope will be overcome before the Conference.

That would allow the Monitor to declare the MoU implemented – after 6 years of work on an agreement, which was originally a symbol of hope: humanitarian concerns prevailing over political interests during conflict and occupation.

As you will recall, the Nairobi Council adopted a resolution concerning the MoU which also calls on National Societies to – and I quote – “favourably respond to any request for help and support that the Monitor may ask of them in the fulfilment of his task up to the next Council of Delegates”. In the spirit of this resolution, the Standing Commission asked the Federation to identify, in consultation with the Monitor, an ad hoc group of National Societies, with a mandate to contact the parties involved in the implementation of the MoU in preparation for the Council and the Conference. The National Societies of the USA, France, Turkey and Indonesia are preparing for a mission towards the end of June to meet with all parties concerned – if there still are unresolved issues by then.

We have grave humanitarian challenges facing us in ever increasing disasters and conflicts, in the growing number of victims they leave behind. When we sit together with our governments around the Conference-table, it is my hope that we leave politics outside the meeting halls and focus on our humanitarian concerns. We have a proud Conference history. We have managed – with very few exceptions – to keep it from being high-jacked by political interests. I hope we can keep this track record clean also this year.

To strengthen humanitarian partnerships with our governments, we can offer an excellent tool before and during the Conference: the pledges.

They offer a simple and clear way to agree on concrete measures to implement actions in support of the overall objectives of the Conference, nationally and why not regionally, in the coming 4-years. I hope you will engage early on with your government – and with each other – to discuss and develop concrete pledges. It is a natural way of preparing for the Conference and opening channels of exchange and cooperation. Pledges can also be a good way to demonstrate in practise your auxiliary role in key areas.

I thank you for your attention and wish you continued good discussions, also in your closed sessions tomorrow. I look forward to keeping the communication lines open until we meet again in Geneva in November.

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