

**First meeting of the Group of Ambassadors
31st International RCRC Conference
April 4, 2011**

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Chairman of the Standing Commission
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this first meeting in a process, which we hope will lead to regular consultation in preparing for the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, scheduled for the end of November here in Geneva.

I am grateful that so many distinguished representatives are present today. Your presence demonstrates interest and commitment to help shape the Conference towards success.

We will discuss the aims and objectives of the Conference, the proposed themes and issues for the agenda, the structure and your role in the preparations in the next 8 months. With me here to introduce to you the substance are my colleagues from the Standing Commission, Philip Spoerri from the ICRC and Bekele Geleta, whom you already heard. They will alternate in hosting and chairing the next meetings. Let me also introduce to you Ambassador Jean-François Paroz, the Commissioner for the Conference. I wish to express our gratitude and appreciation to the Swiss Government for seconding Ambassador Paroz to us and also for their significant financial contribution towards the Conference. Also with me here is Ms Helena Korhonen, the Head of the Standing Commission secretariat.

I believe for most of you, participation in this group is a new experience. Let me start with a short introduction on what the Standing Commission is and of the history of the International Conference. Our Movement is not the easiest to understand!

The Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is a 9-member body, in which all components are represented. It is “the trustee of the International Conference between two Conferences”, to use the wording in the Movement's Statutes and it is entrusted with the mandate to prepare and promote the International Conference, its agenda and programme.

Five of the nine members are elected ‘*ad personam*’ by the International Conference from among the 186 National Societies. We will talk about this election later on. In addition, the ICRC and the International Federation each have two *ex officio* members in the Commission. They are presently President Dr Jakob Kellenberger, and Dr Philip Spoerri, from the ICRC, and President Tadateru Konoe and Secretary General Bekele Geleta for the International Federation.

Since 1863, we have had 30 International Conferences, on the average once every four years. They have played a decisively important role in development of international humanitarian law. In fact, the first conference in 1863 adopted the first Geneva Convention.

Why are states participating in a RCRC conference?

Our Movement was born in 1863, after Henry Dunant's well-known initiatives during the battle of Solferino 150 years ago. Governments soon realised that there was room for improvement in managing the human consequences of war. What began as a pragmatic meeting of needs and services for humanity, developed over time into a strong symbiotic relationship. After 1863, private citizens organised themselves into national humanitarian groupings, from which grew the National Societies, whose work government leaders agreed to encourage on the basis of internationally agreed norms.

To further develop and adapt humanitarian action to the realities in the field, it was agreed that regular meetings should be held to exchange information and to adopt collective measures to strengthen that action.

A dynamic cycle of action, discussion and commitment was born. We are here today to continue this dynamic process.

The Standing Commission values highly the involvement of governments in the conference preparations, because we see this cooperation as a privileged and a unique relationship and partnership. The Conference, which deals with humanitarian needs and concerns, was for a long period the only *humanitarian* forum of significance in the world. While this no longer is the case, it is still the *only one* in which state and non-state actors meet on an equal footing to discuss a wide spectrum of humanitarian issues.

Conference debates have focused on real problems in the field. Agreements reached have often meant groundbreaking progress in the protection of war victims and in the ethics of humanitarian action.

Of course, not every Conference has been involved in developing international treaties, although Humanitarian Law has been one of the major preoccupations. The Conferences have also contributed to the internationally recognised ethical code, under which humanitarian work is carried out. *Impartiality, neutrality and independence* are repeated today almost as a revered mantra in most humanitarian contexts. Those three words, along with *humanity, voluntary service, unity and universality*, were defined and accepted as our Movement's seven basic, fundamental principles, adopted by the 20th Conference in Vienna in 1965.

Other important principles and codes have since followed, for example the Principles and Rules for Disaster Relief in 1969, modified in 1999, and a Code of Conduct for all humanitarian agencies active in disaster relief in 1995. Also other mechanisms to encourage humanitarian work, too many to highlight here, have been promoted by the Conferences.

The most recent ones were adopted in 2007 on International Disaster Response and on the Auxiliary Role of the National Societies, which acknowledges the unique task and relationship between the National Society and its government.

The role as auxiliary to the public authorities has its base in the Geneva conventions and in the Statutes of the Movement, which were adopted by the 25th Conference in 1986, reaffirming the status of the National Societies by stipulating that it should be: "duly recognized by the legal Government of its country on the basis of the Geneva Conventions and of the national legislation as a voluntary aid society, auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field." The same statutes state that: "... [National Societies] carry out their humanitarian activities in conformity with their own statutes and national legislation, in pursuance of the mission of the Movement, and in accordance with the Fundamental

Principles. ...[They] support the public authorities in their humanitarian tasks, according to the needs of the people of their respective countries.” Governments have thus agreed that National Societies act in conformity with the Movement’s basic principles and to respect their independence. Further evidence of this specific role is the fact that both the ICRC and the International Federation have permanent observer status at the UN.

This special status of National Societies, along with the equally special mandate of the ICRC and that of the Federation, is at the core of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement being often referred to as the 3rd pillar alongside Governments and NGOs. National Societies are an expression of civil society and an important actor that covers the entire territory in their respective countries, which is one of the conditions for their recognition. They are and can be important partners to governments in a number of humanitarian sectors. I find it important to stress that they *are not* NGOs. Apart from the sound legal base for this, the previous International Conference affirmed it by adopting the resolution in the matter.

The Movement and its components are recognized by their action, their concrete operations to bring assistance to victims of conflict and other disasters. But we are also aware that alongside action, there is a need to influence public opinion, to be acknowledged for our action in speaking for those, who have no voice. To bring the reality of the most vulnerable to the attention of those who need to know, to partners and stakeholders, to the decision makers – nationally, regionally and globally. All these activities, under the umbrella of ‘RCRC humanitarian diplomacy’, are growing in importance, especially in the ever changing political and economic environment.

As you can appreciate, rules are needed for the management of the Conference to guarantee a neutral atmosphere when discussing issues that at times can be highly sensitive regarding security and political considerations. It was precisely to prevent political arguments from high jacking the Conference that the Standing Commission in 1994 decided to involve a Group of Ambassadors in the preparations. Ever since, such a Group has been involved at all the Conferences.

A successful Conference is a joint effort. We intend to keep it that way and are counting on each of you to help us in this important endeavour.

In the end, it is not so important what you and I will get out of the Conference, but what difference we can make for the millions of people, who are the victims of the whims of man and nature.

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