

From the Chair

There is a sense of growing excitement in the air. The Red Cross-Red Crescent world is preparing for the 31st International Conference in late November. Before that, it comes together for the General Assembly of the International Federation (IFRC) and for the Movement's Council of Delegates. These meetings deal with our internal issues and plans, with policies and strategies. At the Conference we sit together with the governments, with States Party to the Geneva Conventions.

It will again be a giant gathering; the entire world is there, 186 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and 194 States – if everyone decides to attend, as they normally do. At any given moment, we will be plus/minus 1000 people filling the already familiar Geneva International Conference Centre. Meeting rooms and corridors are alive with debates on humanitarian issues and challenges, issues that can make or break people's lives and livelihoods in conflicts and disasters. We are going to hear about the realities on the ground in natural disasters, conflicts and other situations of violence. We will exchange best practises and debate challenges from the angle of legal frameworks, such as International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as well as discuss practical measures to guarantee the flow of aid to those in need and to assure respect and protection to the thousands of volunteers, who turn the humanitarian message and mission into concrete assistance.

The Conference is a truly unique forum. Since the first Conference in 1863 it is still a widely recognised important humanitarian forum. And it is still the only one where States

sit side by side with representatives of Civil Society, on an equal footing. Together they work towards better practises and standards in humanitarian undertakings, towards promoting and developing needed legal instruments to secure and maintain respect for independent and impartial humanitarian action wherever and whenever needed.

I'm once again looking forward to what I know will be a truly inspiring experience, where activists and leaders, volunteers and professional diplomats are together in a setting, where the ultimate goal is to make sure humanitarian action for the most vulnerable in the most difficult circumstances will prevail over other interests. 'Our world' is full of unaddressed vulnerabilities; 'our move for humanity' calls on us to address those gaps, seek solutions to the problems encountered and to strengthen local humanitarian action.



Massimo Barra
Chairman

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31st International Conference

Under the theme and slogan of 'Our World, Your Move – for Humanity' this 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent opens on Monday morning 28 November, 2011. It will work for about 3,5 days and close after a final plenary meeting on Thursday morning, 1 December.

The convocation of the Conference, and the Council of Delegates, will be issued on 21 May, 2011 and will include a draft provisional agenda for both meetings.

The Standing Commission, which is mandated to prepare and promote its agenda and programme, met on 22 March to decide on the main objectives and agenda items to be addressed. It agreed that the objective of the Conference is *to strengthen International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and humanitarian action.*

In terms of issues to be addressed towards that objective, 4 clusters of challenges are planned for debate:

1. Strengthening IHL – improved legal protection for victims of armed conflict

The Conference will analyse the findings of a comprehensive ICRC study on "Strengthening International Humanitarian Law". This study examines the extent to which the current legal frameworks answer the humanitarian problems presented by armed conflicts today. Whilst the study confirms that better compliance with existing law still remains crucially important, it also reveals legal gaps. Those gaps require further clarification and development to improve the protection IHL offers in all types of conflict. The Conference will have the opportunity to debate the findings of the study and to express its views how best to address the identified gaps and the needs to strengthen the law itself.

As for the 2003 and 2007 International Conferences, the ICRC will distribute a report on "IHL and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts". The report reflects ICRC's analysis based on observations and experiences in recent conflicts. Some of the topics identified in the report could be the subject of debate during the upcoming Conference.

A 4-year Plan of Action on IHL is being prepared, for Movement components as well as States.

2. Strengthening Disaster Law

will involve measures to promote and develop domestic risk reduction legislation in order to support positive action on community level. The gap identified in this area reveals lacking guidance about best practise in risk reduction legislation, especially when it comes to community level involvement and efficiency. The RCRC can add value through its extensive coverage and experience, reaching all through to the local levels, where it can benefit from the network of volunteers and community structures.

The previous Conference in 2007 adopted the Guidelines for domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief – better known as IDRL. Experience and research has shown that gaps in legal preparedness may contribute to slower, less effective and more expensive international emergency operations. While progress has been recorded in implementing the guidelines towards more effective assistance, more work is needed in the present trend of increasing disasters, both in terms of numbers and impact.

Emergency and provisional shelter is a specific challenge, as has been observed in e.g. Haiti and Pakistan. Within the framework of disaster law, this matter is legally challenging as it involves complex national laws on land use and ownership

rights as well as equity concerns.

3. Health challenges

Violence, or threats of violence, in health care in armed conflict and other situations of violence are in terms of the number of people directly and indirectly affected a major under-recognised humanitarian issue today. It is present in most conflicts. The situation affects both those in need of health care and those providing it. In an extensive research project covering 16 countries the scope and the scale of the problem was revealed showing that wounded and sick people often remain vulnerable to attack and do not receive the care to which they have a right.

It is hoped that the Conference will adopt recommendations for governments and the Movement components on how to deal with this critical situation and move improving action forward.

Barriers to equitable health care provide another angle of health issues at the Conference. Unequal access to health services is a major cause for vulnerability. It affects the already most vulnerable populations – the most excluded, poorest and most marginalized. Access to health care is recognized as the most practical and cost-effective way to avert maternal and child deaths, as an example, and to reduce the burden of disease.

The Conference provides an opportunity to address this issue at international level with a view to finding solutions for better access and better collaboration between States and National Societies to improve in particular mother and child health care.

4. Strengthening local humanitarian action

aims at promoting, recognizing and protecting volunteers during this 10th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteering.

RCRC volunteers reach around 30 million people annually in disasters alone. The numbers grow when health promotion, disaster preparedness work and anti-discrimination programmes are included. More than a third of the tens of millions of RCRC volunteers deliver health services in their communities. The social benefits go well beyond the strictly measured financial benefits, which are estimated to amount to 6 billion US dollars worth of services in 2010.

The Conference is expected to deliberate on how to promote a more enabling environment for volunteer work along with better acknowledgement of the value of their contribution and better instruments for protection of volunteers.

The 2007 Conference adopted a resolution on the auxiliary role of National Societies to the public authorities in humanitarian work. A continued dialogue with governments on this partnership is essential to strengthen the capacity of National Societies, enhancing performance, transparency and accountability. A sound legal base ensures that they can work better as neutral and independent auxiliaries, also when addressing humanitarian concerns in their national context.

Violence, discrimination and exclusion are still challenges that cause suffering for millions of people across the world. The RCRC is committed to promoting social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace. The Movement wants to bring this issue to the Conference, to discuss with governments how to further strengthen strategies, action and partnerships to achieve this goal.

In this context, work with migrants is a high priority for National Societies in many parts of the world. They need humanitarian access to migrants, regardless of their legal status. This essential right was acknowledged in the declaration 'Together for Humanity', adopted by the 30th Conference. However, there are concerns that the basic humanitarian

standards for migrants are under threat.

The Conference can hopefully pave the way to better access to migrants in order to safeguard their minimum humanitarian standards.

Pledges

will be an important part of the expected outcomes.

National Societies and governments alike are encouraged to early on engage in dialogue, to plan commitments on how the challenges that the Conference will debate can be addressed in their countries. Pledges have proven popular with National Societies and States alike, and are open also to observers.

Other issues

The Conference will receive a report on the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) and the Magen David Adom (MDA) in Israel.

Important progress has been made since its beginning in late 2005. Despite this, there are still important obstacles that have to be overcome before the Independent Monitor can declare the MoU fully implemented. It is hoped that the remaining open issues can be resolved before the Conference, with facilitating involvement of other National Societies. The Monitor will continue his work with all parties involved to that effect.

Workshops, side events...

As before, there will be workshops dealing with issues related to the main themes but outside the formal Conference agenda. The Standing Commission will in the coming weeks propose workshops on topical questions, to be planned

and facilitated by National Societies as well as government partners in cooperation with the ICRC and the IFRC.

The Group of Ambassadors

Since 1994, the Standing Commission has invited a Group of Ambassadors from among the Permanent Missions in Geneva. The Group is an important advisory body to the Commission and to the co-organisers, the ICRC and the IFRC.

Ambassadors from 30 countries, representing all regions of the world and various groups, have been invited to advise on issues pertaining to substance and participation, on potential problems of a political nature and to promote the aims and objectives of the Conference.

The first meeting was held on 4 April in Geneva. The organisers heard many views regarding the substance of the Conference and the preferences concerning its organisation. The response was overall favourable regarding the planned main objective, the themes and topics for the agenda. The contributions of the ambassadors will help ensure a fruitful Conference that responds to the needs of all participants.

The group is expected to meet 2-3 times before the opening of the Conference. An open consultation meeting for all National Societies as well as Permanent Missions is planned for early September.

**Group of Ambassadors
31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

Africa (7)	Americas (7)	Asia/Pacific (8)	Europe (8)
Egypt	Canada	Australia	Sweden
Ethiopia	Chile	China	France
South Africa	Brazil	Indonesia	Germany
Senegal	Colombia	Japan	Hungary
Lesotho	México	Jordan	Russia
Nigeria	U.S.A.	India	Switzerland
(Awaiting confirmation from one invited country)	Jamaica	Pakistan	Kazakhstan
		(Awaiting confirmation from one invited country)	United Kingdom

SC elections

The 31st Conference elects five (5) members to the Standing Commission for a 4-year term, until the 32nd Conference in 2015. National Societies as well as States vote in this election.

Nominations of candidates, who have to be members of a National Society, are invited using nomination forms, which are available at the Standing Commission secretariat in Geneva (contact@standcom.ch).

It is recommended that the nominations are submitted to the SC Secretariat no later than by the end of September 2011, for early sharing with National Societies and Governments on the Commission's website.

Council of Delegates

The Council, which is the highest deliberative body internal to the Movement, meets on Saturday 26 November, after the IFRC General Assembly and immediately before the Conference.

Nuclear Weapons will be on the agenda, building on a resolution by the Nairobi Council in 2009. The aim is to define a Movement position on these weapons, highlighting the human costs and the difficulty of reconciling their use with IHL. This item is not on the International Conference agenda.

Also, as a follow-up from workshops in Nairobi, two important topics will be discussed: cooperation with actors external to the Movement and guidance for National Societies

working in situations of armed conflict and other situations of violence. The latter item emerged from issues around collective responsibility and partnerships.

Further, the Strategy for the Movement is on the agenda. The Nairobi Council asked for an evaluation of the Strategy, or more precisely, how well the three strategic objectives and the expected results from the 10 actions have been achieved. The report and its recommendations will be shared with the Council for guidance on work that needs to continue, such as that on Movement fora and the review and revision of National Society statutes. The Council is also expected to give its directions as to options for Movement level strategic guidance in the future, based on the evaluation findings and recommendations. This would be direction for the new, incoming Standing Commission.

Before the Conference, the Council will hear the report of the Monitor on the MoU between the PRCS and the MDA.

How to ensure Red Cross Red Crescent heritage is safeguarded for future generations in a fast-moving world is also on the Council agenda, for decision.

Regarding the 31st International Conference, the Council adopts its agenda and proposes its officers.

along with information on criteria have been sent to all components entitled to submit nominations. The documents are available, if needed, from the SC secretariat.

Last but not least

The Standing Commission wishes to thank all National Societies, the ICRC and the IFRC for their continued financial and other support and looks forward to an active and participatory exchange and involvement in the months ahead of the November statutory meetings.

It also acknowledges, with appreciation, the interest and participation of many Permanent Missions, in particular that of the Ambassadors in the advisory Group, for their commitment in the preparations of the Conference ahead.

The next meeting of the Commission will be on September 20-21. That meeting will finalise all working documents for the Council and the Conference. Any comments on the agenda of either meeting should reach the Commission before the end of August 2011.

Reminder: Henry Dunant Medals

Nominations for these biannually awarded Medals, the highest distinction of the RCRC Movement, are invited from National Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC.

They should reach the Standing Commission no later than at the end of April 2011. Nomination forms

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