

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN THE **MEDITERRANEAN**

*12^a Conferenza Mediterranea della Croce Rossa e
Mezzaluna Rossa*

-San Marino 25-28 Maggio 2015-

Chair, distinguished guests, friends in and of the Red Cross and Red Crescent!

Again, we are together in a Conference of the Mediterranean National Societies, and I am honoured to have this opportunity to address you as member of the board of the Center for the Cooperation in the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean Conference is unique: most other gatherings build on proximity or similarity among the members: few other meetings bring together Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of such diversity as we achieve here today.

Our different histories, our rich cultures, our many tongues and our respective faiths: our different perspectives and readings of the world endow us with a richness of ideas, of thinking, of potential for action and co-operation that is unparalleled in any other part of the world. We always underline the importance of respecting diversity. Our young members elaborate in this regard some slogans: diversity is our best option; diversity has no alternatives; diversity is a gift of life.

If sometimes our diversity feels overwhelming, there is so much that binds us together and enable us to recognise one another when we meet – even when we do not know one another. The rich and healthy food we have learned from tradition to appreciate; our olive oil, which is pure distilled sunshine, a blessed climate with sun and mild breezes, a passionate temperament – and infinite capacity to be together and show one another respect and affection.

All the more shocking is it to see, in our middle, thousands of people perishing – drowning in our Sea while seeking a better future for themselves, their children and families. That is all they are seeking, and

we watch them go down. Every day. And the same happens in southeast Asia for the same reason.

There may be a million people from the Middle East and from various parts of Africa – nobody knows exactly – who have come there looking for an opportunity to come to Europe and – what do they want? They want to work. They do not look for handouts, they look for security, for peace, and for an opportunity to help themselves. And they drown in our midst.

This is a problem that comes from afar and that risk to becomes interesting only when it comes to touch rich countries. But the victims are the same. We can not accept that they become important only when they disturb the Europeans holidays in the Mediterranean. Where they live, how much they suffer, who assist them before they cross the sea ? The local Red Cross and Red Crescent National societies are able to play a role ? And which ? It's enough significant or not ? How many rich National Societies have been requested for support and assistance ? What has been the operational and coordinating role of the Geneva's institutions ? Are

we satisfied or not ? The Mediterranean Conference can not limit itself to elaborate a mere resolution.

Before writing these notes I read the Dubrovnik declaration approved five years ago during the last Mediterranean Conference. Only five years have passed but it seems a century. The Mediterranean situation has radically changed, it's worse. All the tragedies of the world are concentrated in the Mediterranean including a state of war that Pope Francesco has defined a possible beginning of the third world war.

Despite difficulties, many National Societies are doing all they can to help, they make heroic efforts to assist those migrants and asylum seekers on their soil. The volunteers, staff, and leadership of these Societies deserve our gratitude, appreciation – and support.

Still; the migrants drown, and more needs to be done. Much of Europe – “old Europe”, perhaps – appears not to understand what is happening, nor accept a share of the responsibility. States are States, and sensitive to a public opinion that is xenophobic to the point of racism.

We understand the limits this sets for what action they can take.

But we are the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and we are independent – we can act when we wish, and how we wish, within what the Fundamental Principles permit us to do.

We know that the National Societies of the Mediterranean that are directly affected are doing their utmost to fulfil their humanitarian duties. But we must challenge the Societies of the rest of Europe: are you showing that solidarity that the Fundamental Principle of Universality demands: “...all Societies ... share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other”?

With the Mediterranean as an arena where all the world’s most fundamental problems manifest themselves, we must lose patience. We must act. We must be faster. Can we think of new forms of response? A large proportion of those rescued are picked up by merchant ships: their crews are true humanitarians but they have little experience and less training. Should we offer teams of volunteers to come on board for the voyage across the Mediterranean – to provide first aid,

PSP, advice on how to act once they are on shore and where to look for help *there*. We could station the teams close to Gibraltar and to the Northern end of the Suez Canal, and if necessary bring them on board by helicopter – I just offer an idea.

The International Conference we approach will also hear more about the implementation of the MoU between Palestine Red Crescent Society and Magen David Adom in Israel. We all are aware of how intricate the relationship is between the parties to the overall conflict in that region, we are encouraged that the two National Societies maintain the capability to deal with one another on the basis of mutual respect. And we are all a little frustrated that the implementation of what has been agreed seems to lag what we have hoped and expected. For which reason I encourage the two National Societies to redouble their efforts, and hope to inspire the Mediterranean conference to offer its wholehearted support to them in their endeavours.

We must think better and we must think larger. We must insist more than before to show to the world that Red Cross Red Crescent and Red Cristal are the same

thing and that their members are all brothers and sisters even if their countries are not in peace.

While migration is the issue that has dominated our television screens in Europe the last few weeks, we are also acutely aware of the fundamental breakdown of the political order and human rights regime in Syria, the emergencies endured by Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Jordan as a result of the population movements that the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts have caused.

Our colleagues from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the Lebanese Red Cross, the Turkish Red Crescent, Jordan Red Crescent and Iraqi Red Crescent struggle heroically to meet the mounting needs – in a context of deteriorating security and other constraints imposed on their ability to assist. Here, at least, the world seems alert to the absolute need to provide assistance, and assistance is flowing in; not as much as we would wish, and not as fast as it could, but at least some help is arriving. Still, our governments need to be more ambitious, both by helping alleviating the suffering they see, and by redoubling their efforts to limit the conflict and eventually end it.

In the last couple of months, we have seen the situation in Yemen go from bad, to worse, to catastrophic. Again, the needs are dramatic, the conflict implacable, and much of the world watches from afar – doing little or nothing. And in Libya.

These situations are not going to away on their own, and we look to our governments to show the leadership necessary to help end them.

In the meantime, we will do what the Red Cross and Red Crescent always does: assess the need, mobilise the resources, assist those who suffer or are vulnerable, and get on with our work. We know what to do – we only need more support.

The countries around the Mediterranean Sea face other challenges, too. One of those is the continuing scourge of substance abuse, one of the biggest problems of Humanity causing enormous sufferings in every corner of the world.

In the last 30 years the Mouvement has produced many

documents and guidelines to push National Societies to be involved in this field of activity. Their leit motiv consist in promoting what we call "humanitarian drug policy": less prisons, less violence, more therapies, harm reduction, substitution treatments, fighting stigma and discrimination. 1/3 of people in prison in the world is there for problems linked to drugs and this is a true ongoing goal for humanity.

Drug use is a humanitarian concern requiring action. We in the Red Cross and Red Crescent focus on volunteer-based efforts against stigma and discrimination, and in favour of prevention, care and universal access to treatment and recognise that this can be achieved only by addressing stigma and discrimination and tackling harmful cultural practices, structural barriers, and negative gender norms.

Reducing stigma and discrimination leads to a wide range of social benefits: reduced levels of homophobia, inequality and inequity, uptake of treatment and to increased empowerment, economic independence and overall access to health care.

Do we do enough?

Sometimes we try. In 2007 the Italian Red Cross initiated the Rome Consensus for a Humanitarian Drug Policy. Since 2012 we have a platform, RC RC Partnership in Harm Reduction.

This provides a framework for clear health principles and practices, information and research on drug consumption issues and best practices in drug policy responses.

In our region Croatian, French, Portuguese, Italian and especially Spanish Red Cross are active in this field.

People must be at the centre of the response. That is also the case for the critical role of front-line responders working with affected people. Many of them are volunteers. Volunteers, together with the communities and people affected can play a pivotal role in making services available, accessible and affordable to the most remote areas. Volunteers should be trained and managed as valuable assets and not as a form of cheap labour.

Governments should develop humanitarian drug policies through legislation and strategies that decriminalize drug users, reduce barriers to their participation in normal life, and enhance their access to

health and care.

We urge authorities and other stakeholders to build strong cooperation with National Red Cross Red Crescent Societies to develop supportive policies and legal frameworks through discussions with key community members and other stakeholders. The aim is to encourage them to observe and respect human rights and promote and implement harm reduction programmes targeting drug users.

I hope that some of these concepts will be approved by the Conference and will appear in the conclusions.

Beyond the migration crisis and the challenge of dealing with substance abuse, Mediterranean National Societies continue to face the longer-term consequences of the financial and economic crisis that washed across the continent in 2007/2008.

National Societies concerned continue grappling with the humanitarian dimension of these consequences: people with inadequate access to food, to clothing, to shelter.

And, arguably, one of the impulses leading to increasing migration flows is the secondary consequences of the financial crisis. Let us not forget that when the crunch came in Europe, people in East Africa lost their jobs within days. Many of those waiting in North Africa for passage to Europe have fled the conflicts in the Middle East and in several parts of Africa – but many also come that way for reasons of economic constraints, some of which are related to the economic policies of Europe.

The many examples of practical solidarity with those affected by economic difficulties, or conflict, or – as is the reality in most instances, a combination of these two, where one reinforces the other- is an example of where we need to go, collectively: in the direction of action.

We cannot meet without mentioning the conflict that has been raging in Syria for several years. Thousands upon thousands dead, more injured, and even more displaced or driven into exile in the neighbouring countries and beyond.

Let us, first of all, pay tribute to the heroic efforts of the volunteers of Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society, more than fifty of whom have sacrificed their life in the line of duty. We have lost colleagues in other countries, too, but nowhere else in recent decades have individuals of the Movement come under such sustained and vicious attack. There, the last remnants of Humanity are being persecuted by its enemies. It seems that Henry Dunant was not born and that Geneva Conventions were not signed.

This is one of many reasons it is so important that the International Conference in December aspires to deal with the issue of safeguarding volunteers and staff of National Societies and the wider Movement.

The background is, of course, that the work of our volunteers and staff brings comfort, relief and often life-saving assistance to people facing the most dire of consequences of disasters, health emergencies and conflicts, yet the safety and access of these humanitarian workers is no longer guaranteed in these environments.

Our shared capacity to continue to respond rapidly and effectively to crises hinges critically on substantial local networks of volunteers and staff. Ensuring they are adequately prepared, trained, supported and protected in their work is a shared responsibility of the Movement and States.

This requires action. The time for seminars is over, so is the time for celebrating ourselves. We need action, and we call upon, first of all, ourselves, to show leadership.

And we call on our Sister Societies, the ICRC and the International Federation to support us and to walk this road together with us, till we reach a destination that is, like the best days in our Mediterranean: calm, bright, quiet, and at peace.

Thank you for your attention.

Massimo Barra