

**International Conference:
Information and Culture of Humanitarian Dialogue
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“The role of the international movement of
Red Cross and Red Crescent to serve humanitarian dialogue”

Remarks by Dr Massimo Barra

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Moderator

Dear Friends,

my name is Massimo Barra. I am an Italian medical doctor. A “normal” medical doctor in the morning, working for 35 years in a Clinic. A “not normal” medical doctor in the afternoon, working in an anti-drug Centre to help drug users to stop their dependency. I am also a volunteer of the Red Cross since the age of 8 and this morning I was very happy to listen what some of you have said. First of all thanks to have remembered Henry Dunant. The founder of the International Movement of Red Cross/Red Crescent was a great man. If we are here today, is also thanks to him, the first to speak about Humanity in the battlefield. He was also a little bit crazy, because only a crazy and visionary man could have created in the 19th century the Red Cross.

I also heard this morning words that are very familiar to me: dialogue, always and with all; the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and respect for diversity. Our young people in the Italian Red Cross created some slogans as “diversity has no alternatives”, “diversity is a gift of life”, “diversity is our best option”.

During this session, we shall focus on “The Humanitarian Dialogue: International Concept”, and to shed light on this subject we have with us two individuals with distinguished careers, varied experience and rich knowledge of the subject.

Let me introduce them to you:

Dr Dimianos Khattar, a former Minister of Finance in Lebanon, and a well-known adviser on strategic issues. Dr Khattar was also a volunteer of the Lebanese Red Cross. The Lebanese Red Cross is the only Red Cross and not Red Crescent in the Arabic world. What does it mean? Red Cross and Red Crescent are the same thing, part of the same family, Red Cross and Red Crescent have no religion meaning. They work together without any discrimination.

And, I introduce you also Dr Nasser ZEIDAN, Professor of International law in the Lebanese University. He, too, will illuminate our subject with the wealth of his own experience and research.

Before giving the panellists the floor, allow me to offer some reflections from my own point of view.

The first thing to say about the International Red Cross and Red Crescent and humanitarian dialogue is that it is fundamental to who we are and what we do. Our principled stance of active neutrality, impartiality and independence is a choice. We have made that choice because it is only through fostering trust in who we are, what we do and how we behave that we can secure access to those who need our help.

Our origins on the battlefield taught us that we need to speak to those who fight one another if they are to allow us come to the aid of the wounded.

We have taken that insight into all we do and have done over the past 150 years – and as we have expanded our fields of activity to encompass response to accidents and disasters, care for refugees and displaced people, offering health services and advice, or supporting community development. All of this has come about as a result of dialogue with those involved.

Dialogue is, in our daily life, a positive experience. It is something we engage in when we wish to achieve agreement with our friends, colleagues – and families.

When we discuss *humanitarian* dialogue, we are moving into a different terrain. *Humanitarian* action almost always takes place in situations which are difficult, tense and, often, conflictual – even outside actual war-like contexts. And, of course, even more so in armed conflicts. In these situations, we have to speak to people and parties we would not like to be associated with under normal circumstances.

Let me mention a couple of examples. Some of you will have heard of the “White buses” that were used to evacuate people from camps in Germany towards the end of the Second World War. This was an initiative of Count Bernadotte, President of the Swedish Red Cross, and he managed to rescue more than 30.000 people. In order to achieve that, he held long conversations with Heinrich Himmler – an individual remembered as one of the worst criminals in history. But: we had to speak to him.

We would not have been able to carry on working in countries like Lebanon during the civil war, or Afghanistan, without speaking to those involved in the conflict – regardless of what we might think of them – as private individuals. In the ghastly situation that exists in the Middle East today, we have to speak to the Government of Syria – and with the various groups that opposes it.

Secondly, to expand a little, humanitarian dialogue is indispensable also outside classical conflict situations. We cannot help individuals or communities without speaking with them. When the world was in the grip of panic over HIV/AIDS in the 1980’s and into the 1990’s – some people still are in a panic – we had to speak to those who had contracted the disease, those who were most vulnerable to it, and – even more difficult – those who opposed helping the sufferers. At the time, the idea of speaking to homosexuals, prostitutes, and other people living in the shadows of society, was not universally popular. But how could we help vulnerable people protect themselves, if we did not have a dialogue?

It is the same with, for example, people with serious addiction problems: we have to enter into a dialogue with those who “own” the problem – even if they are not the easiest counterparts.

Finally, and this is not the most visible aspect of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, but perhaps one of the most important. The Red Cross and Red Crescent is a forum for dialogue. Some of it takes place in public, as at the forthcoming 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which will take place here in Geneva in early December. That is, essentially, an opportunity for the Movement to conduct a dialogue with States on common humanitarian concerns. This year these include International Humanitarian Law, Sexual and Gender based Violence, protection of volunteers and humanitarian staff, protection of health facilities, and a range of issues related to disaster response and resilience.

Out of sight, and in addition, there is dialogue going on through the 189 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies currently recognised internationally. Because of our reputation for neutrality and impartiality, people from countries and factions that are, officially, enemies, are able to get together and discuss the scope for understandings about how humanitarian concerns, on either side, may be met.

So: The Red Cross and Red Crescent is based on dialogue as an idea; a willingness to speak to those who matter in any given situation; and itself as a forum for dialogue. And we shall continue that tradition. Always.

With that, I invite Dr Khattar to take the floor and share his insights with us.

Dr Khattar, the floor is yours.