

4.5

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

4.5.1 Opening of the First Plenary Meeting by Mr Massimo Barra, Chairman of the Standing Commission

(Original English, Spanish and French)

Madam President of the Swiss Confederation, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, leaders of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, ladies and gentlemen, dear Red Cross and Red Crescent friends, this 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent convenes under the slogan: Our World. Your Move – For Humanity. For our common humanity, for the world we share and that again faces enormous challenges – wars and conflict, environmental threats, financial crises, food shortages, to mention but a few. These challenges threaten not only the functioning of governments but also organizations like ours and – perhaps, and surely even more important – the daily lives of people, in particular the most vulnerable in our societies, who ultimately, as a rule, end up paying the price for all hardships.

This gathering of governments and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as representatives of civil society is unique, in the true meaning of the word. Nowhere else, in no known structure, do these parties sit together, next to each other, on an equal footing, as equal partners, to analyse and discuss common humanitarian concerns. Further, this happens in a setting in which political controversies and interests are left outside this building, which contributes to an environment that is not exactly everyday practice, especially for representatives of States. The fact that it is the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement that sets our agenda adds to the uniqueness of this conference.

Reflecting on how this is possible in today's so often divided world leads me to the concept of trust: trust in each other, trust between individual States and National Societies, trust in an open and honest dialogue, where no party is expecting to be taken advantage of or used for narrow political gains – in spite of the political agendas of governments and the humanitarian priorities of the Movement.

The aims of this conference are to strengthen humanitarian law and local humanitarian action. I want to underline the word strengthen. In public perception, both mentioned areas of work are already intimately linked to the Red Cross and Red Crescent. In the past, this conference has been instrumental in developing humanitarian law, in emphasizing the importance of adhering to it and ensuring it stays relevant in the situations it is intended for. In the same way, the work of National Societies, reaching the smallest and most remote communities in every country of the world, is almost a synonym for humanitarian action in people's minds.

We come back to trust: the Movement enjoys the trust of beneficiaries, as well as of donors, supporters and partners that it will stay true to its Fundamental Principles, especially to humanity, impartiality and neutrality, in all its actions. As a matter of fact, the Red Cross and Red Crescent is seen as the public good round the world. This I have personally experienced when witnessing a variety of situations where trained volunteers, proudly carrying our emblems, have met people in need – such as migrants landing on the island of Lampedusa, victims of earthquakes and floods or drug users rescued in the streets.

In spite of impressive achievements, there is always room for improvement – as with everything in life. The issues we will discuss and deliberate upon during the next four days will in the end clarify what

exactly we aspired to when setting strengthening as an objective – and you will be vital architects of and contributors to that development.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the previous conference in 2007 has already achieved important results in moving the humanitarian agenda forward. It also powerfully demonstrated that major humanitarian concerns truly are shared priorities for States as well as for our Movement. Another milestone was the recognition of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as auxiliaries to public authorities in the humanitarian field. There are not only formal, legal grounds for this role; perhaps even more so, such a mandate is the result of the broad reach of our work, nationally, regionally and internationally.

It is a statutory requirement for its recognition that a National Society cover the entire territory of its home nation. However, it is more important that vulnerable people in need of humanitarian assistance and support, for whatever reason, can be accessed with our action. That makes our Movement an indispensable partner to every government, be it in responding to calamities and disasters, in reducing risks associated with natural disasters or with the impact of climate change, or in mobilizing communities in health-promoting activities and in fighting discrimination and intolerance. The range is wide; it varies from country to country according to local needs and priorities. Again, the auxiliary role builds on trust – the trust of authorities seeking to provide efficient services and needing assistance and the trust of beneficiaries, who know the Red Cross and Red Crescent to be a reliable service deliverer.

Under the umbrella provided by the auxiliary role, good partnership between National Societies and their respective governments can indeed strengthen local humanitarian action. The energy is provided by millions of volunteers who help mobilize the perhaps hidden or sleeping resources in the communities around them. We just heard of such impressive work in Burundi. There are several Burundis represented in this hall today, with equally committed volunteers, who give time and care to people, who give humanity a face and a name. We must salute these volunteers, whose value is remarkable not only in terms of their humanity but also in monetary terms. Their contribution to society should never be underestimated. They personify what Albert Einstein said: only a life lived for others is worth living.

Links and relations are built between governments and National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies

when they work together in any form of humanitarian assistance. This partnership can extend borders; we have seen it work in major disasters and in response to humanitarian needs in conflicts and disturbances. A victim of the earthquake in Turkey or Haiti or of floods in Pakistan or of drought in Somalia becomes a neighbour in need of help, as do the men and women, children and elderly suffering in ongoing conflicts that uproot the security of their lives and turn them into vulnerable individuals in need of help and protection. Governments know and trust the channel that the Movement provides for assistance throughout the world. They can further strengthen it by providing for national frameworks that contribute to disaster response across borders or provide resources for local programmes in their own immediate environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, humanitarian work is not only protection and assistance. Equally importantly, it contributes to building a world without fear or prejudice. As we well know, one leads to the other – fear is at the core of prejudice, intolerance and, ultimately, discrimination and xenophobia; violence feeds violence. Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and in particular, the large youth representation among them, who are driven by the Fundamental Principles that you just heard, are also messengers for a culture of peace, for better understanding and acceptance of different cultures and people, for resolving conflicts and differences in dialogue.

The conference slogan calls on us to make our move – for humanity, or as the saying goes: “Change begins at home.” We are all familiar with this old phrase. In the days ahead, we can set change in motion in all the areas we will talk about and debate here at this Conference Centre. We are the leaders; we can show the way. Let us be inspired by the power of humanity, by the difference each of us can make to promote it and for millions of people needing our help and services every day. In the words of Winston Churchill, “Never, never, never give up.” Thank you.

Madam President of the Swiss Confederation, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, leaders of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, I welcome you to this 31st International Conference.

As called for by Rule 15.2 in the Rules of Procedure of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Chairman of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent shall open the first plenary meeting.

It is my pleasure to warmly welcome all delegations from National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, from the States party to the Geneva Conventions and from the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. I also welcome all observers, in particular the National Societies awaiting recognition and admission. We are all joined in this hall under the theme of "Our World. Your Move."

I want to extend a special welcome and thank you to our host country, to President Calmy-Rey and through her to the Swiss Government, with our deep appreciation for the support she in person and the Swiss authorities have rendered to the Movement when organizing this Conference.

I now have the honour and pleasure to give the floor to Ms Micheline Calmy-Rey, President of the Swiss Confederation.

**Mr Massimo Barra,
Chairman of the Standing Commission**

(Original English)

Thank you, President Calmy-Rey, for your warm words and your important message to this 31st Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent; I'm certain they have been carefully taken note of and will be recalled in the debates to come.

To further underline the message by President Calmy-Rey, I want for my part to emphasize the principle of humanity, which is the first of the Fundamental Principles and at the core of the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, everything it stands for and everything it does. Deeply rooted in the central message of our Movement's mission, it is our prime source of power. It is also the foremost driving force in our motivation to work for this Movement in various capacities – as volunteers, as activists, as members and staff as well as leaders on local, national, regional and international levels. And it will guide us in our deliberations during the coming days.

With these words, and with your permission, I declare the 31st International Conference open and propose that we proceed with item two on the agenda, which is the election of the Chairman, Vice-Chairmen, Secretary-General and other officers of this conference.

At this stage I would like to thank the representatives of the media for their interest in our conference. They are requested to kindly leave our auditorium, because the conference now moves into closed session.

4.5.3 Election of the Chairman, Vice-Chairmen, Secretary-General, Assistant Secretaries-General and other Officers of the Conference

Mr Massimo Barra,
Chairman of the Standing Commission

(Original English)

Pursuant to Rule 15, paragraph three, of the Movement's Rules of Procedure, we now proceed to the election of the Chairman and the Vice-Chairmen of this Conference, the Chair of the Drafting Committee, the Secretary-General and Assistant Secretaries-General and other officers proposed by the Council of Delegates. It is further proposed that the Vice-Chairs function as chairs of the thematic plenary sessions and the Commissions as indicated in the proposal.

I have received from Mr Jakob Kellenberger, the Chair of the Council of Delegates, Council of Delegates Resolution / 11.10.2, which has also been distributed to you this morning. It was adopted by the Council on 26 November and proposes the list of persons to be elected to serve as officers at this Conference. The nominations have also been posted on the Conference and Standing Commission websites.

Can we elect these persons?

[Applause]

I understand that we consider these persons elected as officers of this 31st Conference. Thank you very much.

It is now my pleasure to invite Ms Niki Rattle to take over the chairmanship of this conference. I also invite the Vice-Chairmen, the Secretary-General and the Assistant Secretaries-General to come and take

their places here on the podium. I wish Niki and her team much wisdom and success in leading the deliberations of this conference.

