

75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

This year, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has celebrated an important anniversary. Seventy-five years ago, five men from five different Societies — American, British, French, Italian and Japanese — sat together to forge a union of Societies around the world, a global consortium united in its quest to serve humanity. Decades later, with a membership of 162 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a total of 124 million individual members and 250,000 employees, the Federation has marked 75 years of response to the suffering of humankind. Now some changes are in order to help us meet our humanitarian goals. Yet our mission, governed by the fundamental principle of humanity, the cornerstone of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, remains constant.

Changes within our Federation are necessary to respond to changes in the world and to better serve humanity. This new world includes a dramatic increase in the number of people needing help, the number, complexity and duration of disasters and the geographical extent of need. From the perpetual threat of famine on the African continent to long-term environmental catastrophes such as that in Chernobyl, the world faces a different kind of disasters today than it did following the Second World War. Disasters are more far-reaching, complex and long-lasting today than ever before. As the nature of these emergencies has changed, the need has also changed. As people face this new kind of turmoil, they look to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for assistance. We can truly say we are needed now more than ever.

Change brings with it both challenge and opportunity. We in the Federation have a responsibility to respond to both. Some have used new liberties they have gained in the last decade to sponsor peace and understanding, to help those less fortunate than themselves, to build solidarity, self-esteem and capacity for self-improvement. Others have used these liberties to revive ancient tensions and to promote discord for self

gain. It is up to the members of our International Federation to foster the former and to strenuously discourage the latter.

The original intent of the Federation's founding fathers 75 years ago is still the intent of the Federation today: respect for human rights under all circumstances, and most specifically, for the vulnerable. To this end, we have drawn up a **Strategic Work Plan for the Nineties**. Its main objective is to increase the capacity of vulnerable people to cope with emergencies through development. We must analyse how disasters are different today and respond accordingly. We must increase our work with disaster preparedness and build our resources. We must focus our efforts on supporting the most vulnerable.

By the year 2000, at least 350 million people a year will be affected by disasters, according to the Federation's annual **World Disasters Report**. If trends continue, this number could reach 500 million. Many of these people belong to the world's most vulnerable groups. The Federation is working to lessen this figure through its current relief efforts and major programmes. In this 75th year, the Federation launched an Emergency Appeal to provide humanitarian aid to some 13.2 million people in 46 countries through 26 emergency operations and continues to issue some specific appeals for unforeseen disasters. The Federation appealed for funds to undertake 437 programmes in 78 countries in 1994, concentrating on disaster preparedness and development, thereby helping the long-term vulnerable to help themselves. It also launched programmes to offer immediate assistance to refugees and displaced people in the former Yugoslavia, medical and social welfare assistance programmes for the newly independent States of the former Soviet Union and rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in war-torn Somalia.

National Societies are responding similarly to local needs. The Malawi Red Cross and other National Societies in Africa have made significant strides in the treatment of cholera and diarrhoea. National Societies in the Americas are reaching hundreds of thousands of people each year with creative health and first-aid programmes. The Colombian Red Cross saved countless lives in the recent earthquake there because it had had the foresight to institute a practical, community-endorsed disaster preparedness plan. The Nordic National Societies have taken the initiative, led by the Swedish Red Cross, to create a vulnerability and capacity assessment system. The Italian Red Cross, which marked the 130th anniversary of its foundation in June, has greatly increased its relief activities in the last two years, especially its operations in Albania and the former Yugoslavia. National Societies worldwide are working to prepare in advance for when disaster strikes.

The key to the work of the members of the International Federation is constant reaffirmation of the dignity of all human beings. We have arranged for three consecutive World Red Cross and Red Crescent Days of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to focus on maintaining this basic human right for every person; this year's focus was on children, and in 1995 it will be on women. The work of our National Societies always keeps human dignity in mind, and many programmes are created specifically to enhance dignity.

For example, National Societies in the Asia and Pacific region, such as the Red Cross of Viet Nam, provide social welfare programmes for the elderly and orphans, enhancing their lives within the community. Red Crescent orthopaedic programmes in places such as Afghanistan help the disabled lead a normal life. The Somali Red Crescent is enabling the Somali people to protect themselves against illnesses through its health care centres. Blood donation is a service that has been provided by compassionate volunteers through National Societies for half a century — the act of individual people giving a vital part of themselves to save the lives of others.

During my travels, I have seen much suffering, but I have also seen much healing. I am an optimist; I have faith in the individual. One single person can bring calm to chaos, can bring peace to the troubled, can bring comprehension to the formerly censorious. It is a matter of faith and firm commitment, and these are the hallmarks of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

Our National Societies are made up of individuals. We rely on millions of volunteers who selflessly carry out our mission of arousing that humanitarian reflex which makes it possible for the world to answer the calls of those who suffer. The Federation, working as a unified whole, has the network, the dedication and the wisdom to achieve its objectives. In our 75th Anniversary Year, I believe that we must further strengthen our resolve to carry out our mandate to prevent and alleviate suffering, thereby contributing to maintaining and promoting peace.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was born to survive. Life itself is a constant challenge; in order to fulfil our mission we have to meet that challenge. Like our predecessors, we shall succeed. All of us together.

Dr Mario Villarroel Lander
President
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and Red Crescent Societies