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**Statement by Mr. Juan Manuel Suárez del Toro,  
President, International Federation of Red Cross  
and Red Crescent Societies,  
Geneva, 3 December 2003**

Today, I speak on behalf of our 181 National Societies around the world that make up the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. I also speak on behalf of the millions of volunteers and members who every day work selflessly to protect the lives, livelihoods and dignity of vulnerable people everywhere. They are indispensable in our efforts to build a better world. So, I consider it an honour, and a responsibility to be before you today. I hope I can convey clearly the strong sense of solidarity and unity among the members of the International Federation in our collective commitment to the theme of this Conference “Protecting human dignity”.

Protecting human dignity means safeguarding the capacities of all individuals, thus making it possible for all people not only to use their capacities but also to develop them to their fullest potential. Protecting human dignity thus implies ensuring respect for the dignity of all human beings and enabling each person to develop to the fullest extent possible.

This in turn implies that no individual is more or less important than another and that we are all entitled to equal respect for our dignity. Protecting human dignity must not be achieved for some by leaving others behind, condemning them to a life of indignity and dependence. Moreover, it is not enough to protect human dignity, we must actively promote it.

At our recent General Assembly, we had the pleasure to welcome three new National Societies to the Federation: the Cook Islands Red Cross Society, the Kazakh Red Crescent Society and the Red Cross Society of Micronesia. We were also pleased to have among us those National Societies that have not yet been recognized and we look forward to the day when we can welcome them as full-fledged members of the Federation.

The International Federation and its member Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, together with the ICRC, are on the front lines when

dealing with threats to human dignity. In every corner of the globe, wherever there is pain and suffering, we provide relief. Where there is grief and desperation, we restore hope. We speak out against inequity, discrimination, intolerance and hate, and advocate on behalf of the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the forgotten. Our humanitarian voice and our actions benefit millions of people each year.

It is precisely these people, the vulnerable, the marginalized, the hurt, the forgotten, the missing — all those whose human dignity is at risk — they are the reason that we are here today. And it is their voices that need to be heard in a conference like this one. So when we speak about protecting human dignity, let us never forget that we are speaking about people, not abstract concepts.

There can be no doubt that the humanitarian landscape has been radically altered in the last few years. We all have been shaken by the recent events and attacks that have taken place in various parts of the world. For those of us in the Red Cross and Red Crescent, we have been particularly alarmed by the erosion of respect for our neutral and impartial work to alleviate human suffering, as well as the growing insecurity faced by humanitarian workers, especially those working as volunteers, with little else to protect them except the emblem.

One of the most disturbing trends we have seen in recent years has been the politicization of humanitarian assistance. Too often, the flow of humanitarian assistance is determined by media attention and political concerns, rather than on the basis of who is most vulnerable or is the most in need. We need to refocus attention on the humanitarian imperative to provide assistance to those who need it most, in a neutral and impartial manner, and without discrimination. This must take precedence over all other concerns.

We must not ignore the other, more hidden threats to human dignity — the ones that don't capture the attention of the media or governments. I am referring not only to the forgotten conflicts, but also, the day-to-day situations that threaten the lives, livelihood and dignity of millions of people. These are the daily forgotten disasters such as the poverty and inequity faced by millions, or the intolerance and discrimination directed against many groups and individuals, that contribute to increased vulnerability and threaten human dignity.

Among the most serious and pervasive threats to human dignity today are disasters and disease, which claim millions of lives each year. Disasters and disease not only destroy lives but also increase the vulnerability of entire populations by undermining development gains, unravelling social structures

and reducing the ability of communities to cope with crises. These are areas in which the International Federation and its member National Societies have shown their commitment to action, and which we want to highlight during this International Conference.

The burden of disasters and disease falls disproportionately on those who are least able to cope with it: the poor and those who are marginalized and excluded from society, such as minorities, migrants and refugees. Discriminatory policies and practices that deny vulnerable populations equal access to services, information and decision-making mechanisms which could protect their lives, livelihoods and dignity, further exacerbate the situation.

Just a few days ago, World Aids Day took place, reminding us again that HIV/AIDS is certainly one of the most serious humanitarian challenges we are facing today. We all know by now that the escalating impact of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic is tearing apart communities, families and individuals. We know that the complex interaction between HIV/AIDS and other problems makes the impact of the pandemic even greater. And we know that access to compassionate care and access to treatment are fundamental to allowing people living with HIV/AIDS to preserve their dignity and contribute to their communities.

Yet, despite all we know, our response is still lagging too far behind. Funding for the fight against HIV/AIDS is woefully inadequate. Access to affordable antiretroviral treatment is still far from reaching the millions of people who require it. Proven methods to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS are being questioned. And ignorance, stigma and discrimination and societal attitudes continue to hamper our efforts to reach those who need our help most.

Within the Red Cross and Red Crescent, we have had to grapple with the reality of HIV/AIDS and the impact it is having on our staff and volunteers. We have learned to confront our own attitudes and fears to make the Red Cross and Red Crescent a more welcoming home for those living with HIV/AIDS. And we have scaled up our efforts to combat the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS and to support prevention and care programmes. Furthermore, we are actively looking into ways to improve access to treatment.

Our programmes reach millions of people, but all these efforts are not enough. We need to do more. And we need to work with governments, civil society, groups representing PLWHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) and others to ensure that our efforts have the maximum impact.

Similarly, we cannot ignore the impact of disasters and the threat they represent to human dignity. In recent decades, the number of people affected

by disasters has risen dramatically. Disasters break down the resilience and coping mechanisms of communities and individuals, and undermine efforts to reduce poverty and improve quality of life. The causes of disasters are many, including the effects of climate change and extreme weather conditions, but reducing the impact of disasters depends largely on how well we — governments, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and communities — can work together in preparing for and responding to situations of disaster.

Too often, the impact of disasters is made worse because of poor planning, environmental degradation, and inadequate response mechanisms. That is why disaster risk reduction is critical to preventing and avoiding situations that make communities vulnerable. Just as importantly, while we focus on reducing risks, we need to be able to respond effectively when a disaster strikes. And following a disaster, we need to ensure that our efforts contribute to longer-term development which incorporates risk reduction into planning. These are areas where National Societies and the International Federation can also bring valuable experience and knowledge to the discussion.

One key area that we believe requires more attention is the area of policies, laws, and procedures relating to disaster response. We have long known that a rapid and effective response at the local level is critical to saving lives. But when a disaster exceeds local response capacity, resources often have to be mobilized from the international community.

At times, laws, policies and procedures act as a barrier and impediment to effective and coordinated disaster response. This is why we believe that governments and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies need to work together at examining the laws related to international disaster response, in order to identify gaps and weaknesses, and look for appropriate solutions. Our focus here is to identify, publicize and apply existing legal frameworks more effectively in order to save lives, and minimize the effects and impact of disasters, particularly on those who have few resources and coping mechanisms to recover.

These threats to human dignity are not new. We know about the vulnerability caused by disaster, disease and conflicts, and we know that investments, even on a small scale, can pay big dividends in terms of protecting human dignity. So, how do we respond to these threats? What does protecting human dignity mean in practical terms? Again, the answers are not based on theory, they come from experience.

Building the capacity of individuals, families and communities to respond to and cope with situations of vulnerability is the first step. We need

to work more closely with vulnerable communities, and support them in finding long-term solutions, in a manner that respects their culture, hopes and aspirations.

Capacity building of civil society organizations is also critical. The scale of the humanitarian challenges presented by conflicts, disasters and disease are well beyond the ability of governments alone to handle. Governments need to work in partnership with civil society organizations and with communities to strengthen capacity and reduce vulnerability.

In this sense, I want to highlight the need for governments to support more actively the work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The unique nature and status of the partnership between National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and governments, along with the global reach and far-reaching perspectives offered by the International Federation and the ICRC, makes this a powerful alliance, with enormous potential to engage with the key humanitarian challenges we have before us.

We need governments to better understand the work we do, and the fundamental principles that we adhere to as a Movement. This means understanding that, while we work as willing partners with governments in efforts to confront contemporary humanitarian challenges, we must at all times maintain our independence, neutrality and autonomy. I would like to draw your attention to the report "National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as auxiliaries to public authorities in the humanitarian field" which has been prepared by the International Federation for the Conference. It highlights several areas that need further attention in maintaining a relationship of mutual respect between governments and National Societies, and I hope that we can discuss them during and following the Conference.

I would like to especially mention the important role of volunteers in our efforts to protect human dignity. Voluntary service is one of our Movement's core principles and values. As I said, the humanitarian challenges we face are too great to face alone. That is why we need to continue to promote and encourage voluntary service. Without volunteers, we will not be able to perform the tasks before us, and we need to acknowledge that without them, we will not be able to make an impact in the huge task of protecting human dignity.

We rely on volunteers to carry out our activities; we must learn to appreciate them and be grateful for their selfless work. We need to invest in training and resources to support volunteers. Governments can help by supporting National Societies, creating an environment that encourages voluntary

service. They can also help by recognizing and supporting the valuable contributions made by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and voluntary organizations in general.

Finally, our efforts to protect human dignity depend not only on action, but also advocacy. The basis of human dignity begins with respect for the individual, and empathy and compassion for those whose dignity is compromised. It requires undertaking efforts to raise awareness of the threats to human dignity and generate a commitment by all to promote tolerance, respect for diversity, mutual understanding and a culture of peace.

Protecting human dignity means taking action to allow communities, families and individuals to grow stronger, to enjoy fuller and more productive lives, and become less vulnerable. It means taking action to empower vulnerable populations to reduce their risk and vulnerability to disasters and disease, and strengthen their capacity to cope with and respond to situations that threaten their lives, livelihoods and dignity. It means allowing vulnerable people to have a voice and to participate in decisions that affect them and their dignity.

It also requires governments to demonstrate their commitment to human dignity by establishing and strengthening policies, laws and practices that protect the integrity of the individual, and ensure fair, equitable access to programmes and support services to all those who need them, regardless of their status or circumstances.

And it requires governments and the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to mobilize civil society, businesses, and others to work in partnerships with vulnerable communities, and to listen to their voices and concerns and look for lasting solutions to the humanitarian challenges we face.

The challenges we face in protecting human dignity are enormous, even overwhelming. But they are not insurmountable. Together, we can build a better world, to move forward towards that goal. We can take our inspiration from the founder of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, Henry Dunant, who mobilized support from the community and from the States, in order to attain noble humanitarian aims. This is the example that we should follow.

We must also never forget that the human face of despair – can also be the human face of hope and dignity. We can make a difference if the will, determination and commitment are there. That is the challenge before us in this International Conference — to take meaningful action to protect human dignity, and to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of vulnerable people everywhere.