

Keynote address by LOUISE FRÉCHETTE Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations

Throughout its history, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has been the world's standard-setter in humanitarian action. You have been an inspiration to the community of nations, and an indispensable partner to the United Nations.

The partnership between our organizations continues to grow, even as we face an ever more complex humanitarian agenda. It is an agenda replete with new challenges, which I hope this Conference will help us explore together:

- how to ensure the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian assistance;
- how to promote cooperation among voluntary, governmental and intergovernmental actors;
- how to coordinate effectively the provision of increasingly complex and diversified humanitarian aid.

These issues require all our resourcefulness. I hope we will be bold in our thinking over the next few days.

Earlier this year, we marked a milestone together when we celebrated the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions.

Those Conventions were inspired by the guiding values of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: impartiality and humanity. They reflect humankind's determination to ensure, even in the midst of war, a minimum of respect for humanitarian principles. And they are the Conventions which the Red Cross strives, every day, to translate into practice.

Yet, in this anniversary year — this final year of the final decade of a century of war, genocide and immense suffering — we cannot say that the Conventions are universally respected. Nor can we say that, in the conflicts of the past decade, civilian populations have been spared.

Civilians are still forced from their homes; driven to borders which are open one minute and closed the next; forced into hiding; separated from their families; made to act as human shields; stripped of their identities and callously killed.

Worse, in the 1990s civilians have become the very targets of warfare, in campaigns of genocide and so-called “ethnic cleansing”.

During the wars of the past decade, many millions have been killed. Over thirty million have been displaced. Countless men, women and children have been denied access to life-saving food and medicine.

These flagrant violations of international humanitarian law have become not just the effect of war, but almost the essence of it.

We have observed that belligerents increasingly take care to avoid direct confrontation with each other. Instead, their favoured strategy to gain ground is the exercise of terror against defenceless civilians.

And humanitarian assistance itself has become an instrument, cynically exploited by warring parties, as they seek to achieve military and political objectives by taking humanitarian workers hostage, or by denying them access to a starving population.

Among our own United Nations staff, civilian casualties now outnumber military ones. Just three weeks ago two of our colleagues were murdered in Burundi, and one in Kosovo, within a few hours of each other. The same week, seven United Nations staff members were held hostage in Georgia.

But the United Nations has no monopoly of such tragedies. The same sad reality affects all humanitarian agencies, including — as I do not need to tell you — your own Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, always at the forefront of humanitarian action in the most dangerous battle zones.

In short, at the end of a century that has seen the creation and refinement of so much admirable international law, civilians have rarely been so vulnerable.

The conventions of international humanitarian and human rights law are wilfully disregarded by combatants, and enforced only sporadically by the international community.

That is deeply disturbing. Indeed, it is a source of great concern to the Security Council, which earlier this year asked the Secretary-General to prepare a report on “The protection of civilians

in armed conflict”. He submitted that report in September, and it is available to all of you at this Conference. The report makes a total of 40 concrete recommendations, to improve the legal and physical protection of civilians in armed conflict. On the legal side, it lays particular stress on the need to bring those responsible for war crimes to account.

In this respect, the Security Council’s establishment of ad hoc tribunals to prosecute and punish war criminals in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda was a major step forward. Such tribunals can be a powerful deterrent to those contemplating war crimes in the future — provided the international community makes good use of them, and does not flinch from prosecuting the highest-placed offenders, who often bear the gravest responsibility.

An even more important step, of course, will be the creation of a global enforcement mechanism, the International Criminal Court. The adoption of this Court’s Statute last year was a great achievement, in which the Red Cross Movement played a notable part. The United Nations thanks you for that, and urges you to keep up the pressure on Member States to ratify the Statute, so that the Court can start work as soon, and with as wide a jurisdiction, as possible.

On the practical side, the report recommends some very concrete measures which the Security Council could take to protect civilians. Among these are:

- preventive deployment of peace-keeping forces;
- measures to control or close down “hate media”;
- greater use of targeted sanctions against those who commit egregious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and against parties which flout the Council’s authority by continually defying its resolutions;

All these recommendations, and others in the report, are eminently achievable if we show sufficient determination to put them into practice. They could greatly expand the range of tools and strategies available to the Security Council in responding to particular situations as they arise.

Finally, the report recommends that in extreme cases — where the parties to a conflict commit systematic and widespread breaches of international humanitarian and human rights law, giving

rise to threats of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes — the Council should be prepared to intervene with superior force, using its powers under Chapter VII of the Charter.

There must of course be objective criteria to determine the threshold for any such intervention, but the possibility of it should be kept open, if only as a deterrent.

Undoubtedly it is a difficult step to take, since it often goes against the narrowly defined national interests of some or all of the States called upon to take the decision. But there are universal principles and values which should supersede such interests. The protection of civilians in armed conflict is one of them. Ultimately, it is a matter of political will — the will to confront the cruel but complex realities of conflict today.

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These realities require us all to learn and to adapt. Over the past decade alone, the role of the United Nations in matters of peace and security has evolved significantly. Most of our recent peace-keeping missions have involved us in situations of internal conflict.

But there is as yet no clear consensus within the international community about its rights and responsibilities in such situations. This year's Kosovo crisis illustrated that all too well.

In his speech to this year's General Assembly of the United Nations, the Secretary-General invited Member States to reflect upon these vital questions.

He argued forcefully that States should not be allowed to hide behind the rampart of sovereignty to abuse the rights of their own citizens, and suggested that the international community should be prepared to act, including the use of force in extreme cases, in order to stop such aggression.

But he also underlined the danger inherent in allowing such decisions to be taken outside the framework of the United Nations Charter and the authority of the Security Council.

Our concerns for the safety, security and survival of innocent civilians make it imperative for the international community to forge a new consensus on these matters. Otherwise we shall

be left with two equally undesirable options: action without authorization of the Security Council on the one hand; on the other, disagreement within the Security Council resulting in inaction, while ethnic cleansing, mass deportations and murder continue before our eyes.

Yet it goes without saying, I hope, that forceful intervention is an extreme measure, justified only in extreme circumstances. It is always preferable — and should always be possible — to intervene at an earlier stage and in less drastic ways, so as to prevent matters from ever reaching such an extreme pitch.

Indeed, the Secretary-General made it clear, in his address to the General Assembly, that intervention need not take the form of using force. The best interventions are those that avert the need for that, by helping States to avoid getting into the kind of conflicts that give rise to atrocities.

Preventing wars is obviously desirable in itself, given the enormous suffering they inflict. In addition, recent years have taught us an important secondary reason for wishing to develop better prevention policies. Repeatedly, the failure of prevention has involved the international community in costly and very difficult efforts to deal with the aftermath of conflict.

To take a few obvious and topical examples, look at the tasks we are now faced with in Kosovo, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Rwanda, in East Timor, in Sierra Leone, or in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Not only is there relief to be provided, and enormous physical damage to be repaired. Not only are there basic services to be re-established. Not only are there combatants to be demobilized, mines to be cleared, elections to be organized, police forces to be trained. Hardest of all is the restoration of trust — the basis of all normal relationships between civilized human beings, but also the first casualty in every war.

So it is far, far better if we can prevent conflicts from arising in the first place. And we can only hope to do that if we have a clear understanding of the forces that create them.

The Secretary-General explored this theme in a recent address to the staff of the World Bank, in which he stressed the links

between conflict and poverty, between peace and healthy economic development.

These links are not simple or straightforward. If poverty by itself were a sufficient cause of conflict, all poor countries would be at war. Thank God, most of them are not.

But it is surely more than coincidence that the vast majority of today's conflicts occur in the developing world, while prosperous nations can manage quite acute differences between communities, concerning both material resources and feelings of national identity, without resorting to violence.

So that is an additional reason why we must not resign ourselves to living in a world where nearly half the human race — some 2.8 billion people — is struggling to survive on less than two dollars a day. If we can change that — and we must — we shall surely in the process prevent many future conflicts.

But we also need to address inequalities within societies, particularly those which some researchers call “horizontal” inequalities — where power and resources are unequally distributed between groups that are also differentiated in other ways, for instance by race, religion or language. So-called “ethnic” conflicts occur between groups that are distinct in one or more of these ways, when one of them feels it is being discriminated against, or another enjoys privileges which it fears to lose.

So we should be careful that our development policies help to reduce this kind of inequality, or at least do not exacerbate it — as has sometimes been the case in the past.

And we should give much higher priority to ensuring that young people have job opportunities offering them a real alternative to enlistment in armed bands which prey on their fellow citizens. Too many conflicts start, and even more become almost impossible to stop, because war is the most profitable economic activity, or even the only viable one, for significant parts of the population.

None of these prevention policies is easy. All require significant resources, which have to be expended before a crisis develops, at a time when other needs may seem much more pressing to political leaders and their constituents. But I believe the bitter experience

of the last decade is making more and more of us realize that money spent on prevention is indeed well spent.

And I look to your Movement, along with others that have direct experience of the appalling consequences of conflict, to help us get that vital message across. The more it is publicly understood, the better the chance that political leaders will feel able to act on it, and that something called “the international community” will at last come together to uphold the basic dignity of humankind.

That is the hope which has been kept alive, ever since your Movement began, by the men and women of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. Your commitment to the protection of non-combatants has been clear and consistent ever since your founder, Henry Dunant, summed up his philosophy as “compassion in the midst of battle”.

And so, on behalf of the United Nations, allow me today to thank all the members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent for more than half a century of partnership. For leading the way by example, by principle and by practice. For giving hope to all the victims of conflict.

May this last International Conference of your Movement in the twentieth century be a source of inspiration to all of us in the twenty-first!