

## **Keynote address by DR ASTRID N. HEIBERG President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies**

At the heart of the Red Cross and Crescent lies humanity. Humanity as a principle of preventing and alleviating human suffering, but also humanity as the power of the human spirit — such as in our more than 100 million volunteers keeping hope alive throughout the world.

“Keep hope alive!” was the motto of the 26th International Conference in 1995, which I had the honour to chair. Hope has been kept alive all through this brutal and devastating century. Through world wars, cold war, ethnic wars. Hope was kept alive in the muddied fields of Central America last year, in the flooded areas of China and Bangladesh, in the rubble in Turkey and Taipei, in the refugee camps in the Balkans, in the mine-riddled lands in Angola.

And if hope has survived this century, this age of extremes, then I believe we will keep hope alive for the next century as well. But to do so calls for commitment — our common humanitarian commitment.

### *Preparedness for natural disasters*

Even if war is a killer, nature can be even worse. Over the last decade, natural disasters have on average killed around 128,000 people and affected another 136 million every year.

We may speak of exceptional combinations of drought and flood, we may speak of exceptional hurricane patterns. But what we used to consider exceptional has become regular. Our 1999 edition of *The World Disasters Report* gave some disturbing messages:

- first, climate change is no longer a doomsday prophecy, but a reality. It does take place;
- secondly, the changing climate means changing disaster patterns. We will see far more extreme weather conditions in future, weather patterns that will cause disasters. These days India is hit again by the fury of another super-cyclone.

New natural disasters are more complex and more comprehensive than in the past. In Honduras last December, 60 per cent of the country's economy was destroyed in just two days. We see super-disasters that overload

the world's emergency response capacity and drain the reserves of the global insurance industry. In parts of the Caribbean, the insurance industry has stopped insuring — it is too risky even for the industry living from risk.

Natural disasters hit the most vulnerable hardest. Over 90 per cent of all deaths caused by disaster occur in developing countries; and the economic losses are — relative to the size of the economy — twenty times greater than in industrial countries. And the outlook is not good: with almost a billion people now living in unplanned urban shanty towns, with deforestation wrecking ecological defences, and with global warming making the forces of wind, rain and sun ever harder to predict and counter, the poor people of the world are more at risk than ever before.

These are alarming predictions. But we must have the courage to move beyond mere statements about gloomy pictures and depressing statistics. We must look at what solutions we can provide.

The first challenge is to prepare ourselves. Are we prepared?

An evaluation carried out last spring of preparedness and response to Hurricanes Georges and Mitch found that international resources often arrive too late to be of assistance during the immediate post-event phase. And foreign medical teams actually placed “another burden on the health institutions during the most critical time of the response”. Aid given was sometimes misdirected, because local communities were not sufficiently involved in needs-assessment or response, and coordination between affected countries, international agencies and donors was not adequate. These were general statements. But are we sure they are not also relevant to us? I do not exclude that.

New solutions are needed. More investment before disaster strikes — in strengthening the disaster preparedness and response capacities of hazard-prone countries — would mean fewer lives lost and fewer donor funds wasted in the aftermath.

What does this all tell us?

Disasters can no longer be separated from development. We must stop seeing disasters as disturbances in the steady progress towards greater development and instead see them as part of development. When governments are unable to cope with the burden of disaster, then disasters have become a development challenge. Therefore governments, financial institutions, and international organizations must integrate our knowledge about disaster patterns in their development strategies.

We do have the knowledge needed to act. We know that:

- we can *mitigate* disasters by taking measures ahead of time to reduce their impact, such as better forecasting and warning systems. Many natural disasters are becoming annual events and can be predicted. What is needed, is to act on these predictions;
- we can *prepare* for disasters by integrating disaster preparedness at all levels, and ensure that the international relief system matches the local system. One important lesson from Hurricane Mitch is that local preparedness must also imply being prepared to receive international assistance;
- we can *respond* to disasters by improving systems to release funds more promptly;
- we can carry out *rehabilitation* in a way that contributes to long-term improvements for the vulnerable.

We can do all this, if governments and international organizations pull in the same direction. But we cannot deliver if governments continue the present trend of cutting back on development assistance and emergency aid. Official development aid is now at its lowest level in the history of development aid. And emergency aid has fallen by 40 per cent since 1994.

Negative as it may be, this trend is a reality. So rather than only complaining — everybody does that — we would take the liberty to offer advice on how to spend the limited funds available.

Dear friends, investing in disaster preparedness pays off.

- The World Bank and US Geological Survey have calculated that economic losses worldwide from natural disasters could be reduced by as much as 280 billion US dollars by investing around one-seventh of that sum in preparedness, mitigation and prevention strategies.
- Or, to speak of gains rather than losses: In China, a recent analysis indicated that 3.5 billion dollars invested in flood control has saved the economy 12 billion dollars of potential losses.

Preparedness makes the difference. But what do we mean by preparedness? That depends on the local reality. Let me give two examples:

— In Bangladesh, satellites track typhoon movements in the Bay of Bengal, warning messages are relayed into threatened areas through dozens of dedicated radio stations and up to 30,000 Red Crescent-trained volunteers with loud hailers encourage people to use concrete typhoon shelters. This typhoon and flood early warning sys-

tem provides a successful model of how technology and community-based action can combine to save lives.

— Less sophisticated, but no less important, are the simple signposts put up in the South Pacific, indicating east, west, north and south. When people hear weather forecasts on radio, they will know where the cyclone is coming from and can take precautions accordingly.

So effective preparedness can be high-tech or low-tech, but it must be local. And the backbone of local preparedness is volunteers. This is why the International Federation pledges to this Conference to strengthen the role and status of volunteers in our organization.

#### *Preparedness in times of armed conflict*

The importance of local and national preparedness is also evident in armed conflict. In the last few years we have seen how military and militia campaigns can displace vast populations in few hours and days. We see how social unrest has the potential of developing rapidly into violence. In these circumstances, humanitarian action cannot wait, and this is why we need to secure local and national preparedness.

We see how many armed conflicts are no longer international in the traditional sense, but are rooted in complex national or regional realities, with history, culture and ethnic origins playing an important role. In such situations there are limits to what outsiders can do, because the conflicts are so all-encompassing, so intertwined with local realities. This is why we can prevent violence more effectively with local Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers promoting humanitarian values, and doing so in a way that is adapted to local and national reality. As an acknowledgement of this, our National Societies will take on a more active role in promoting humanitarian values and international humanitarian law, to make the next fifty years of the Geneva Conventions even more successful than the past fifty years.

Any society is a delicate network of history, culture, economy, politics, all that shapes local or national identity. When this network is threatened with deterioration, because of conflict or disaster, then those living in the society, those who are part of the fabric, are the ones best placed to prevent, limit and repair. International assistance in times of emergency will always be needed, but no international organization, no donor government or donor National Society can replace the preparedness on the spot.

Our Movement as well must acknowledge this in our international activities. Our international efforts must be coordinated, and they must enhance local capacities. In the “Seville Agreement” between the ICRC, National Societies and their International Federation, developing National Societies’ capacities is an important element. As we are now embarking upon shaping a Strategy for the Movement, we will reinforce this joint effort.

### *Conclusion*

Last week, the International Federation adopted the Strategy 2010, the common strategy of all National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and their Federation. Here, we commit ourselves to be more focused in the way we work. A key focus is to improve disaster preparedness and response capacities through our National Societies.

We cannot do this alone. Therefore I will use this unique opportunity, when our Movement meets with governments on a purely humanitarian platform, to invite the governments to unite with us in a partnership for preparedness. We have the local expertise, because we have the people, in virtually all countries of the world. You have resources, however scarce, and they should be invested with a better return. Together we can build local preparedness, together we can improve national preparedness plans, together we can incorporate disaster preparedness into development plans.

Together we can prevent a lot of misery. We always say we want to make a difference to the lives of vulnerable people. Our challenge is that we actually can. We *can* take on this humanitarian commitment. Let us do it.