

34th International Conference

28 October 2024, Geneva

Opening address

Mercedes Babé

Chair

Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Mr Federal Councillor of Switzerland, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Excellencies,
Representatives of the States party to the Geneva Conventions,
Representatives of the Republic and Canton of Geneva,
Esteemed members of the International Conference,
Distinguished observers and guests,
High-level representatives of international organizations,

It is my duty and indeed my pleasure, as chair of the Standing Commission, to address you here today at the opening of this 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and I extend a warm welcome to all the delegates gathered for this important event.

I would like to say a special word of thanks to our host country, Switzerland, represented by His Excellency Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis. Both I personally and the Standing Commission are deeply grateful for your valuable collaboration and the generous support we have received for the staging of the conference.

As I said during my address at the joint opening ceremony for the Red Cross and Red Crescent meetings we have held over the past few days, we are very happy to be here in Geneva, a city that always welcomes us with open arms and where the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was born out of the idea of our founder, Henry Dunant, to alleviate human suffering.

Geneva has become the epicentre of initiatives and movements seeking to promote peace, harmony and prosperity, as evidenced by the presence in the city of so many organizations and institutions involved in defending the right to human dignity.

The International Conference is the Movement's supreme deliberative body, and we have the privilege and honour, as representatives of civil society, of sitting down with you, the States party to the Geneva Conventions, to discuss key matters of humanitarian concern and make joint commitments in a non-political forum where Movement components and States have an equal voice.

Today, the media and new communication technologies provide us with an increasingly instant, non-stop stream of detailed information about the unbearable living conditions of millions of people who are exposed to situations of vulnerability as a result of selfish, uncaring and intolerant behaviour that is repeated everywhere.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent vowed to fight this reality more than 160 years ago. We could even say that its stand against senseless violence and inequality was its foundational purpose. Since that time, it has been committed to promoting and delivering the most effective humanitarian action to prevent and address all causes of human suffering.

Our Fundamental Principle of humanity highlights what the Movement puts before all else: the need to take action to prevent and alleviate human suffering. Respecting human dignity, helping people, regardless of who and where they are, and promoting peace is at the core of everything we do.

In all corners of the world, wherever there is pain and suffering, we are there to provide relief. Where there is hardship and despair, we restore hope. We raise our voice to advocate for dignity and respect for all vulnerable, forgotten and marginalized people. We work to build a fairer world and to overcome inequity, discrimination, intolerance and hatred. Our action in the areas of health and disaster response has benefited millions of people.

Everyone here recognizes the role of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. The 193 components of the Movement – 191 National Societies, the ICRC and the IFRC – are key partners to States in addressing the consequences of armed conflicts and disasters and working day to day with communities to increase their resilience to shocks.

This auxiliary role requires mutual trust among all the components of the Movement and with you, the States and the communities we serve – a relationship based on cooperation and trust that unquestionably strengthens humanitarian action at all levels.

Ultimately, this International Conference is about being accountable to all the people who need us and all those we serve. It allows us to take stock of how we are doing in fulfilling our mission and our mandate to protect and help them and to explore how we are going to respond effectively and efficiently to today's challenges and those ahead.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent spirit infuses people with humanity, inspiring them to mobilize and serve selflessly and unstintingly to alleviate suffering and motivating them to volunteer to help respond to crises and develop local capacities.

Millions of committed volunteers all over the world give their time to help those most in need, putting faces and names to HUMANITY. They are young people, women and men who dedicate their lives to helping others and sometimes lose their lives in the course of their work. Let us remember and pay tribute to all those who give their all to make this a better and more human world.

The years since our last International Conference in 2019 have proved to be a troubled time that has led to the situation of great uncertainty we face today, with dramatic consequences for people around the world. As the slogan of our 34th International Conference highlights, we are currently navigating an uncertain environment and at the same time aspiring to strengthen our commitment to humanity. The first step towards fulfilling this goal is to commit to it wholeheartedly, and the second is to work with perseverance and steadfast resolve until we achieve it.

Experience has shown that humanitarian action cannot be confined to the mere delivery of assistance. Our initiatives must contribute to addressing the structural factors that lead to people facing hardship and becoming vulnerable. We must be resolutely committed to protecting human life and dignity. This means overcoming the consequences of senseless wars, violence and poverty, ensuring access to acceptable levels of health and education, protecting the environment and achieving equality between men and women.

It is clear that in order to bridge this gap, it is necessary to muster solidarity and to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law. We must all continue contributing, as far as we can, to spreading a culture of solidarity as the only real option for the future of humanity.

This International Conference, with its commissions, side events, thematic sessions and the Humanitarian Village, provides an opportunity for debate on these issues. For it to be a success, it must be a safe space for humanitarian dialogue, and it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to find the right balance so that the conference is kept free of political controversy and all participants observe the requirement to maintain neutrality in the debates.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to humbly express what a great honour it has been for me to have chaired the Standing Commission for almost five years and the satisfaction it has given me to share these intense days of work with the members of this 18th Session of the Standing Commission.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us now build common positions and strategies together so that we can contribute, through our collective efforts, to *alleviating human suffering and strengthening humanity*.

Thank you very much for your commitment and hard work. I wish you all a successful and productive conference.