



**Opening and closing remarks at  
the preparatory meeting for the  
34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

**Mercedes Babé**

Chair

Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Geneva, 6–7 May 2024

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**Opening remarks – 6 May 2024**

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Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues from the National Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC,

Dear friends,

I am Mercedes Babé, chair of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. It is a great pleasure to be here with you today at this preparatory meeting for the 34th International Conference.

I am pleased to have with me Ms Kate Forbes, president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and Ms Mirjana Spoljaric, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), both *ex officio* members of the Standing Commission, and three other elected members of the Commission: Mr George Weber from Canada, vice-chair of the Standing Commission, and Mr Hilal Al-Sayer from Kuwait, who are attending in person, and Ms Fine Arnold from the Cook Islands, who is participating online.

As you know, the Standing Commission is the trustee of the International Conference, and its main functions include making the necessary arrangements for the next International Conference, addressing matters of concern at International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement meetings and promoting harmony in the work of the Movement.

In arranging the International Conference, we of course have the vital support of the ICRC and the IFRC, who have been delegated by the Standing Commission to host and organize the event.



Five years ago, in the months running up to the 33rd International Conference, a preparatory meeting was held for the first time with the Conference members, at the initiative of the Standing Commission. In view of its success, we are repeating it this year.

The International Conference is the Movement's supreme deliberative body, where the States party to the Geneva Conventions come together with the components of the Movement to discuss key matters of humanitarian concern and make joint commitments. It is a unique forum where the Movement components and States speak with the same voice.

The members of the International Conference are:

- the 193 components of the Movement, namely 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which are recognized and act as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field in their respective countries, the IFRC and the ICRC
- the 196 States that are currently party to the Geneva Conventions.

The International Conference usually takes place every four years and aims to:

- contribute to promoting respect for and the development of international humanitarian law
- improve people's safety, security and dignity by strengthening legal frameworks and policies
- shape the global humanitarian agenda
- promote relationships, partnerships and synergies among its members.

One of the Conference's objectives is to achieve practical outcomes that have a positive impact on the lives of vulnerable people.

The International Conference takes decisions in the form of resolutions, generally by consensus. Participants also make voluntary commitments in the form of pledges.

As highlighted by the theme proposed for the 34th International Conference, we are navigating a landscape of uncertainty as we endeavour to strengthen our commitment to humanity. We must therefore remain focused on strengthening our preparedness and response to address today's enormous humanitarian challenges, including armed conflict and violence, natural disasters and climate change, among others. We must adapt to the uncertainties they bring in order to mitigate the impact they have on people's lives.

The Standing Commission, as trustee of the International Conference, and I myself as chair consider this process of consultation and compromise with you all, the Conference members, to be of paramount importance.

The Standing Commission greatly appreciates all the comments and suggestions received from both States Parties and National Societies. Your feedback has been taken into account in preparing the draft zero resolutions and drawing up the draft provisional agenda for the Conference, which was published in April following its adoption by the Standing Commission.

This two-day meeting provides a forum where Conference members can exchange views and opinions on the resolutions proposed for the 34th International Conference, with a view to building the consensus we are all keen to see to enhance humanitarian action. This will



facilitate the work of the drafting committee during the International Conference and promote relationship-building among Conference members. I encourage you to take an active part in the proceedings and continue this work between now and the Conference.

Before I finish, I would like to remind you that the International Conference must also elect five members in a personal capacity who, along with two representatives from the ICRC and two from the IFRC, will serve on the Standing Commission, which acts as trustee between Conferences and is responsible for preparing the agenda for the next International Conference.

It is important that all the Conference members know what the process entails. When casting your vote, you must take into account the personal qualities of the candidates and the principle of fair geographical distribution and gender balance.

Finally, it is an honour for me to introduce the following people who have been appointed as officers for the 34th International Conference:

- Chair of the 34th International Conference, Ms Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz, who is attending the meeting virtually. She will chair the Conference and the plenary session debates, promote consensus and ensure that the proceedings run smoothly. She will also be the chair of the Bureau of the Conference.  
She is the first woman to hold the position of chair of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society and is committed to promoting women's leadership at all levels and addressing protection, gender and inclusion issues. She also serves on the IFRC Governing Board.
- Vice-chair of the 34th International Conference, Prof. Muhammadou M.O. Kah, who has been the ambassador to the Swiss Confederation and permanent representative of the Gambia to the United Nations Office, the World Trade Organization and other international organizations in Geneva since August 2020. His role will be to support the Conference chair.  
As an academic, he has held a number of positions since 1995 in higher education establishments in the United States, Europe and Africa, including assistant professor at Howard University and Rutgers University and founding dean at the American University of Nigeria.  
Happy birthday, Ambassador Kah!
- Chair of the drafting committee, H.E. Mr Christian Guillermet Fernández, permanent representative of Costa Rica. He will guide and direct the negotiations of the drafting committee to finalize the resolutions to be adopted at the last plenary session.  
He worked with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva and Santiago (Chile) as regional representative ad interim from 2006 to 2008 and served as deputy permanent representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations in New York from 2019 to 2020. He also held the position of deputy minister for multilateral affairs in Costa Rica from April 2020 to June 2023.
- The following people will act as officers for the Commissions:
  - Commission I: New Zealand – Ambassador Ms Anna Louisa Duncan
  - Commission II: Secretary general of the Zambia Red Cross Society – Mr Cosmas Sakala

**Commented [JC1]:** Is this date correct? The website of the United Nations Office at Geneva says he was appointed in February 2001. (<https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/presentation-of-credentials/2021/02/new-permanent-representative-gambia-presents>)



- Commission III: Bangladesh Red Crescent Society Governing Board member – Mr Mohamend Mouzarul Islam
- General rapporteur: President of the Turkish Red Crescent Society – Ms Fatma Meric Yilmaz
- Finally, Ambassador Mr Jürg Lauber, permanent representative of Switzerland since 2020, who many of you already know and who is here on the table with us, will be the secretary general of the Conference. He also performs the crucial role of political and diplomatic adviser to the Conference and has been assisting the Standing Commission, the ICRC and the IFRC for many months now with the preparations for the event.  
Ambassador Lauber has an extensive career as the permanent representative of Switzerland to the United Nations both here in Geneva and in New York and has also served as the permanent representative of Switzerland to the Conference on Disarmament. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Swiss Government for Ambassador Lauber's time and also for its generous support for the organization of the 34th International Conference in Geneva.

Dear friends, your excellencies, it is now time to start our work at this preparatory meeting.

I would like to introduce the two people who will be facilitating the debates today and tomorrow: Mr Olivier Ray, director for Mobilization, Movement and Partnerships at the ICRC and *ex officio* member of the Standing Commission (representing the ICRC); and Mr Christopher Rassi, chief of staff and director of the Office of the Secretary General of the IFRC.

I urge you to play an active role in this work and contribute to the preparation and success of our International Conference which, as I said before, is a unique forum for humanitarian dialogue. I would also ask you to remember that, as stipulated in Article 11(4) of the Statutes of the Movement and with a view to ensuring a constructive and non-politicized meeting, speakers must not at any time engage in “controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature”.

I will end by reminding you that I myself and the other members of the Standing Commission here today are available to answer any of your questions over the next two days.

Thank you all for your hard work and commitment.

Thank you very much!

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**Closing remarks – 7 May 2024**

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Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues from the National Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC,

Dear friends,

We have had an intense day and a half of debates and, on behalf of the Standing Commission, I would like to convey my sincerest gratitude to all of you, whether you have attended in person or online, for your enthusiastic participation and valuable inputs.

It is clear that all of you, as Conference members, value this meeting as a unique forum for humanitarian dialogue and are wholeheartedly committed to ensuring its success, especially at a time when the multilateral environment can, as we all know, prove complicated. Thank you very much for enabling these debates to take place in a climate of respect and compromise. I hope that we can continue in the same constructive spirit over the coming months.

As chair of the Standing Commission, I am very pleased to have seen, increasingly as the meeting progressed, the high level of mutual understanding, joint presentations and discussions between governments and National Societies. It is a good model that we have been promoting for some months and that we hope you will continue in the run-up to the International Conference.

As mentioned yesterday, the co-organizers will draw up a brief summary of the issues discussed at the meeting, highlighting the areas where there is broad agreement and those requiring further attention. This written summary will be an informal record; it is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of the meeting's debates and will not attribute views to individual members.

There will be a two-week period after this meeting for you to send any written comments on the draft zero resolutions. The deadline for the submission of comments is 24 May 2024. In the coming months, we will continue our work and discussions to resolve points of disagreement before the official draft resolutions are prepared and distributed in September.

I cannot close this preparatory meeting and let you go without mentioning that **tomorrow is an important day** for the Movement. On **8 May**, we celebrate **World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day** (you will have seen the Red Cross and Red Crescent flags on the city's buses and on one of its main bridges).

Tomorrow, we will be celebrating humanitarian action locally and globally, and we have prepared a **joint message** for the occasion with the presidents of the IFRC and the ICRC, which we will convey to you in the next few hours.



In the midst of armed conflicts, other violence, disasters, climate crises, epidemics, food insecurity, massive displacements and other devastating situations around the world, as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, we remain **steadfast in our commitment** to help those in need.

This requires the commitment of our International Conference to **defend** humanitarian action, **seek** access to remote communities in need or at risk and **safeguard** the red cross and red crescent emblems and all the volunteers and staff around the world who carry out life-saving work.

Tomorrow, we will fondly remember, as we did today, those of our colleagues who have died in the course of their humanitarian work and **express our immense gratitude** to the millions of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff for their unwavering dedication and service.

We hope that you all have a wonderful World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day and continue to be inspired by our shared commitment to **KEEP HUMANITY ALIVE**.

I would like to finish by thanking Ambassador Lauber for his support and dedication, the meeting facilitators, Christopher Rassi and Olivier Ray (**ex officio member** of the Standing Commission representing the ICRC), for conducting and facilitating the debates so effectively, the meeting organizers for all their hard work to ensure that the event was a success and the interpreters for the wonderful job they have done in **“helping us understand each other”**.

I wish you all a safe trip home and thank you once again for your commitment.

Thank you, merci, shukran, spasibo!