

**Address at the Opening  
49th General Assembly of the ARCO  
Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

**Mercedes Babé  
Chair  
Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

**Madrid, 26 August 2024  
Recorded**

---

His Excellency Eng. Waleed bin Abdulkarim Al-Khuraiji, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia

His Excellency Dr Jalal Al Owaisi, President of the Saudi Red Crescent Authority,

His Excellency Mr Abdullah bin Suhail Al-Muhaidli, Secretary General of the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization (ARCO),

Excellency Madame Kate Forbes, President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies,

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests,

Dear leaders colleagues and friends from Red Crescent and Red Cross National Societies and from the IFRC and the ICRC,

Warm greetings from Madrid! *Sabah alkhayr*, good morning,

My name is Mercedes Babé, and I have had the honor of serving as Chair of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent since 2019. I was humbled to be re-elected in 2024 during the 34th International Conference.

It is a great pleasure to address the 49th session of the General Assembly of ARCO. I extend my sincere thanks for the kind invitation to join you, to its Secretary General Mr Abdullah bin Suhail Al-Muhaidli, whom I had the pleasure to meet in Geneva, last year. And my heartfelt congratulations to the leaders, volunteers, and staff who made this important gathering possible.

Please accept my apologies for not being with you in Riyadh today, due to prior commitments—especially in this milestone year marking ARCO's Golden Jubilee. I am truly

sorry, but I am nevertheless very pleased that two members of the Standing Commission are present with you: Mrs Kate Forbes, institutional member of the Standing Commission representing IFRC and an elected member of the Commission: Mr Georges Kettaneh, Secretary General of the Lebanese Red Cross.

As you are well aware, we are living through an extremely troubling time, marked by a sharp rise in humanitarian needs and protection challenges. These are driven by the multiplication of armed conflicts—over 130 are currently recorded worldwide—alongside natural disasters, epidemics, and mass displacement.

At the same time, the entire humanitarian sector is facing drastic funding cuts. Aid is increasingly subject to misinformation, instrumentalization and politicization, and the very principles of neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian action—so dear to our Movement—are being undermined. Fundamental guarantees of international humanitarian law (IHL), which protect life and human dignity, are being disregarded.

I am deeply saddened and shocked that humanitarian workers continue to be victims of armed violence—often deliberately targeted. The year 2024 may have been the deadliest yet, and 2025 did not start any better. These losses are unacceptable, as it is the disregard for our emblems. I want to pay tribute to the thousands of our volunteers and staff who work tirelessly in service of Humanity, and especially honor the memory of our colleagues who have lost their lives in recent months while carrying out their humanitarian mission.

The picture I paint may seem bleak, but we know that your region is far from spared by these deeply concerning developments. Many of your National Societies are directly affected and are at the forefront lines of humanitarian response. The relentless succession of tragic events since October 2023 affecting civilian populations in the conflict in Israel, Palestine, and neighboring countries is perhaps the most visible example. Meanwhile, hostilities continue - sometimes out of the spotlight - in Sudan, Yemen, and Libya, while new and uncertain developments have emerged in Syria and Iran in recent months, just to name a few. The humanitarian consequences are devastating: countless civilian casualties, mass displacement, overwhelmed or destroyed health services, and mounting evidence of famine and widespread starvation. National and international political authorities bear the responsibility to find peaceful solutions to these wars. They also have the duty to respect—and ensure respect for—the rules of IHL. Without them, we risk abandoning our shared humanity.

Together with the Standing Commission, I attach great importance to ensuring that these humanitarian challenges—including the safety of our volunteers and staff—are at the heart of discussions during the upcoming Council of Delegates. I strongly encourage you to actively

respond to the ongoing consultation on the Council's Concept Note, which was shared on August 15.

I also hold the hope that our statutory meetings next year, as well as your gathering in Riyadh, and the exemplary work of all components, volunteers, staff and leaders of the Movement will continue to be a powerful demonstration of **our UNITY, our COHESION, and our unwavering commitment to PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN ACTION**. Together, we must strengthen our collective impact for those who rely on our assistance and protection. This is also the spirit behind the theme proposed for our upcoming Council of Delegates: **"United for Humanity."**

Over the next two days, you will be exploring issues that matter deeply to your region, but certainly also to the entire Movement. I warmly encourage you to share your reflections in preparation for our upcoming Council of Delegates. I am looking forward to hearing about the outcomes of your discussions and the actions that will follow.

I will conclude here by wishing you a truly fruitful General Assembly and joyful celebrations of ARCO's Golden Jubilee.

Thank you very much for your attention. *Shukran, merci, muchas gracias!*