

Opening Speech
at the
33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
by
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Chairman
Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
Geneva, 9 December 2019

Mr. Federal Councillor of Switzerland, Your Royal Highnesses, Ministers, Excellencies,
Leaders and Colleagues of the National Societies from all over the world, of the ICRC, and of the IFRC,
Esteemed members of the International Conference,
Distinguished observers, guests and members of the media,

Under rule 15.2 in the Rules of Procedure of the Movement, I, as Chair of the Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, have the duty to open the first plenary meeting of the Conference. It is therefore my pleasure to warmly welcome all the delegations that are members of the International Conference, observers from other organizations and guests. Many of us in the Red Cross and Red Crescent family have already been in meetings here for the last five days, so we are especially pleased to open our space now to the State representatives and additional observers and guests who are joining us for the next 3 days of deliberations. You will make our meetings far richer and the decisions we take more impactful for the people we serve.

I would like to express a special word of thanks to our host country, Switzerland, represented here today by Federal Councillor Dr. Ignacio Cassis who is in charge of foreign affairs. We are deeply grateful to you personally, Sir, and to the Swiss government for the generous support we have received for the organization of this Conference. Many thanks.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the 33rd International Conference is taking place 155 years after this humanitarian city of Geneva hosted the first ever International Conference in 1864, thanks to the impetus of five of its citizens, who founded the International Committee of the Red Cross.

This year, 2019, shares two historical milestones for humanitarian action: it is the 100th anniversary of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions. While the International Federation broadened the wartime experience of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to tackle peacetime crises, the Geneva Conventions have protected untold numbers from the devastation, suffering and consequences of armed conflict.

It is this august forum, the International Conference, that has facilitated the creation and development of the norms framing today's humanitarian action. Together, the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the States parties to the Geneva Conventions have refused to let the fate of their fellow human beings, fade into indifference.

I would like to add one more thought about the unique nature of the International Conference. Unlike other international meetings, this forum will not be adopting its own agenda, because we, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, already adopted it yesterday. Rest assured, we will not surprise you with a new agenda, since it has not changed since we sent it out in October, having consulted all of you, as members of the Conference, throughout the year. Our long tradition of Conferences has created an accepted practice of an agenda proposed by the Movement through the first-hand experience of our humanitarian workers seeking to support people caught up in humanitarian crises.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we meet under the banner "Act today, shape tomorrow". As we share the next few days together, I would like us to be mindful of how we call on the past, present and future to shape our work. May we draw upon our solution-focused history to inform our deliberations today, and may we take decisions through resolutions that ensure positive, long-term consequences for the people we serve.

To help us all to reach the goal, the Standing Commission, which is tasked to prepare the Conference, decided to create an event that promotes interaction, networking and learning. Humanitarian problems can be understood in many ways, and solutions are not always. Each one of us in this room brings to the Conference rich cultural and intellectual traditions. Each

one of us listens, understands and learns differently. Through the mixture of the informal spaces – the Red Talks, some forty booths in the Humanitarian Village, the Spotlight Sessions, the Humanitarian Trail, the networking space, the pledging station – and the formal plenary sessions, Commissions and Drafting Committee, we have sought to enrich our understanding of what people in humanitarian crises endure and how we all can improve their plight in the most intelligent and effective ways possible. There are many opportunities while you are here to explore, exchange, see, hear and take a variety of initiatives, so I invite each one of you to contribute your voice, your smile of encouragement or your exchange of a business card to inspire continued action long after this meeting is concluded.

I would now like to touch on three concepts that have come up frequently as we try to make sense of the multi-polar world we live in today, which particularly impact on our humanitarian work, namely: localization, digital transformation and trust.

I believe we are all gathered here because we find value in meeting globally, as it allows us to put our individual problems in perspective and to see how others are dealing with them in order to improve humanitarian outcomes. However, at the end of the day, when we implement the policies we agree on, we have to adapt them to our particular environment, budget, legal and social structures. This Conference is proposing two measures in the localization agenda to achieve that goal. One, that we localize international humanitarian law by encouraging all States to adopt measures that integrate IHL in their country's legal structures in order to better protect their own citizens should they be caught up in an armed conflict. Two, the Conference similarly calls upon governments to adopt climate-smart laws to prepare their countries to respond promptly should a natural disaster strike. By localizing these important humanitarian norms in national frameworks, it can help to create a bulwark to stop the erosion of international commitments, while strengthening crucial safety nets for people affected by natural and man-made disasters.

The second concept, digital transformation, affects us daily as we wonder at the ease with which we literally have a whole world at our fingertips in our smartphones, just as we worry that they make it easy for our children to innocently open up their lives to the world at large. While Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are living proof that physical proximity is irreplaceable in bringing comfort to others, they are now also using smartphones to reach out more quickly to isolated communities to provide information on diseases or safety, gather data for needs assessments, facilitate cash transfers or help to link families together. We are asking this Conference to responsibly apply the many benefits of the digital revolution by protecting personal data the Movement uses for strictly humanitarian purposes.

Trust – the last and arguably the most important concept I would like to address – is fundamental to all human relations. Trust is equally a cornerstone of the proper functioning for relationships between individuals and institutions. Trust is a singular feature of the relationship that links us together in this forum and gives us the confidence that what we will decide together here will produce the most impactful solutions. State representatives have entrusted the Movement to speak on behalf of voices that would otherwise be inaudible. To deserve that trust, the Movement recommitted itself yesterday, at the Council of Delegates, to working with transparency, integrity, accountability and gender equity. The Movement also trusts States to build stronger safeguards that will preserve impartial and neutral humanitarian action. We look forward to a robust debate on trust, so that we all can walk our humanitarian talk.

Ladies and Gentlemen, together, in the days ahead, may we draw from our shared humanity to agree on some far-reaching solutions, in the hope that our collective action today shapes a more humane tomorrow. In other words, let's be true to the Conference's slogan to act today and shape tomorrow.

And now I have the great pleasure and honour to call on stage and give the floor to our host, Dr Ignazio Cassis, one of the seven Federal Councillors forming the collective Head of State of Switzerland, who is responsible for Foreign Affairs.