

Centenary Historians' Conference

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Secretary General

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Thank you David, and thank you all. Let me first of all welcome you to the IFRC, and thank you for putting in so much effort, thought, intellect and competence in looking at the history of our Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. And particularly so in this year, when we take stock and reflect on our 100 years.

There is a popular saying in my culture that if you don't know where you're going, you go back to where you came from. In my mother tongue it translates literally to 'know your past to better shape your future'.

And this saying is often used in that culture by what we call the Praise Singers. When soldiers were preparing for war, praise singers would remind them of their past, and the stories of their ancestors, to fill them with courage. So, we go back to our history and use it as a source of strength.

But it's not only used in the context of waging wars – it's also used when leaders are faced with difficult decisions, in difficult times at family, community and national levels. The Praise Singers would take them back to history with stories of courage, forgiveness, reconciliation, care, support and humility: examples that serve as sources of inspiration and motivation to do nothing less than shape a better future. They remind us that situations like this happened in the past, and that there were people in similar positions who also took courage and inspiration from the very sources of their own history.

And this is being sung in many ways. I'm from Senegal, and one of our famous poets [and of course politicians] is of course Senghor. He was a *tirailleur sénégalais* – a French soldier at the time of the Second World War – and he came back and wrote this famous line: 'Mère, je suis un soldat humilié qu'on nourrit de gros mil. Dis-moi donc l'orgueil de mes pères'. He wanted to hear the pride of his forefathers and his ancestors, to help him tackle the humiliation of the day, and beyond, and to take solace and strength in history to shape the future.

Well, you are not Praise Singers, but you are historians, and historians are also repositories of our collective memory. I look forward to learning more from you about the pride of our forefathers and mothers, to guide us to shape the future over the next 100 years of our

Movement.

So I warmly welcome this great initiative, and would especially like to thank Melanie Oppenheimer, Davide Rodogno, Neville Wylie, our own Grant Mitchell and all the organising committee, who have worked so hard to make it happen. Thank you all, and thank you to all 20 of you remarkable historians from around the world for contributing new research on the Federation, on the International Committee of the Red Cross, and on National Societies.

So I am privileged to join you this morning, and please consider this address as my humble attempt to contribute to our collective memory.

And I am privileged to do as the 17th Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – the IFRC – and its forerunner the League of Red Cross Societies – at the very moment when our organisation celebrates its 100th birthday.

Each of those SGs and Presidents would tell his own story. (I say 'His', because ... you know why!)

And the particular person whose story we celebrate this year was the first President, the American banker Henry Pomeroy Davison.

Davison died of a brain tumour aged just 54, almost 3 years to the day after the birth of the League. And 18 months before, he had written from his sick bed to Sir David Henderson – the Briton who was the first in my role – about what he called the 'many and exceedingly difficult problems' that he felt that he himself had created, in creating the League.

Already, there were serious issues over mandate, mission, money and manpower. Davison's big idea within his 'Big Idea' – the creation of a global Bureau of Hygiene and Public Health run by the Red Cross – had not fully materialised.

He felt a failure. This brilliant, brave, determined, charismatic man – who had created the League in next to no time, almost by force of will – was always plagued by anxiety as to whether his great idea would ever succeed.

By the same token, the other great 'HD' in Red Cross history – Henri Dunant – knew many trials.

He is known to us all as the witness to the slaughter at the Battle of Solferino in 1859. The horrors that he saw that day energised him into creating one of the greatest social revolutions of all time in mobilising compassionate people to give freely of their time and energy to help those in need, and in trying to codify and make a little bit more humane the rules of war. He taught us something very simple, that even on the worst of battlefields, there is a space for humanity.

Dunant was the first Nobel Peace prize winner in 1901. But not so many people know that he was declared bankrupt in 1868, and at one stage expelled from the Committee of the Red Cross which he had founded.

So the Red Cross Red Crescent story is certainly a story of triumphs and setbacks, and I, too, can and will attest to both of those. It is a story of individuals, of a League which became a Federation, and of the individual National Societies which comprise that Federation.

But first and foremost it is the story of triumphs and setbacks in the lives of hundreds of millions of people over 100 years: the world's most vulnerable people whom it is our privilege to serve. The IFRC's mission is not to itself or to its members, but to the poor, the dispossessed, the vulnerable, the suffering.

I'm sorry to use these words. They are not 'identities' for anybody, but just 'situations, in which each of us could find ourselves if we had the misfortune to be born or to grow up in circumstances over which we had no control. They are situations in which we lose our names ... and once-proud fathers and mothers become – overnight – simply 'the beneficiary', 'the victim' or 'the migrant'.

So the Red Cross and Red Crescent has accompanied tens, hundreds of millions of people since 1919, saving lives and alleviating suffering, bringing hope in despair.

It is my contention that the Red Cross and Red Crescent has been and remains a great global good.

But Jacques Chirac, then Mayor of Paris, told our 75th anniversary celebrations in 1994 that to do good was not enough – we had to do good well.

So this morning I plan to reflect on 100 years of the League and the Federation, and to draw out some areas – past, present and future – with a view, as Chirac said, to doing good better.

I reflect on the world of 1919. The 'war to end all wars' had taken some 10 million military lives and as many civilians.

Henry Davison himself had led a massive war effort from the American Red Cross, which grew from a quarter of a million to 20 million members within two years, raised 100 million dollars, and sent 9,000 volunteers to Europe.

'If we were late in entering the war, we are coming now', he said. The American Red Cross was in France, Russia, Belgium, Italy, Romania, Palestine, Serbia and Greece. It provided homes for refugees, TB hospitals for the sick, food, clothing and education.

National Societies all over Europe did the same, and by the end of the war I am told that the Red Cross across Europe had more volunteers than there were combatants.

Davison's huge and simple idea was that this great body of compassion and of practical potential – which was of course already established well before 1914 – could be utilised in times of peace as well as war. It took him just 154 days from the germ of an idea, discussed with US President Woodrow Wilson in the White House in December 1918, to the creation of the League.

The deciding event in the meantime was a medical conference in Cannes in April 1919, the essence of which was to extend the Red Cross functions of relief in war to that of promoting public health during peace.

This April, 2019, I attended its 100th anniversary conference at which we looked at the looming and potentially catastrophic global health threat that is climate change. I was deeply humbled to hold in my hand the proceedings of that 1919 conference. In a world in which there was no internet, no computers, no autocorrect, there was not a single misspelling, barely a superfluous word. I saw for myself the vision of those great pioneers.

In 1919, the world was reeling not just from the devastation of war, but also from the Spanish Flu which claimed 50 million lives, and from a virulent outbreak of typhoid in Poland and Eastern Europe which was to be the first theatre of operation for the new League.

I sit today in a new committee called the Global Preparedness and Monitoring Board, and our biggest fear is that if we have anything like the Spanish Flu today ... despite all of our history, and with so many more resources now, we would still not be ready.

The speed and audacity of the creation of the League were breath-taking. Five Societies were there at the outset: France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan and the United States. A month after the Cannes Conference, two counts, a knight and a professor joined Davison in the Hotel Regina in Paris to sign the Articles of Association.

Its stated purpose was to, I quote, 'supplement the war-time activity of the International Committee with an intelligent peace-time programme'. It says clearly to 'supplement', which already sowed the seeds of complementary and mutual support, rather than the way it is often presented as the division of roles and responsibility. It's a spirit of complementary and mutual support.

That programme had three main goals – to support National Societies in their promotion of health and their mitigation of suffering, to be a source of global knowledge on science and medicine, and to coordinate relief work in great national and international calamities.

Well, these goals are still valid: they have been tested many times, and they are as pertinent today as ever.

But the arrangement in those times was anything but perfect, and anything but fully explored. Some of today's humanitarian principles were – I won't say violated, but ignored. For example, the defeated Axis powers were excluded from the League. Today, with our principles of humanitarian action – like neutrality and impartiality – that would not have happened.

So – at the beginning – many questions were left unanswered.

But as many questions were answered. Within five years the League had raised almost 700 million Swiss francs for some 50 appeals in almost as many countries. 25 National Societies brought food and other assistance to those left hungry and diseased in the Russian Civil War. And when well over 100,000 people were killed in the great Kanto earthquake in Japan in September 1923, the League rallied its National Societies to the tune of 100 million dollars.

Davison's dream lived on – his project was not a failure. It lives today as living testimony to his vision, and to Henri Dunant's, and to the vision of many other passionate and visionary people. It lives on to do good, and to do it well.

You will be relieved to hear that I do not propose to give you 100 years' worth of detailed evidence of where the Red Cross Red Crescent made a difference, but I do wish to extract what I see to be key moments, and themes.

So I chart how we have evolved

From some 30 National Societies in the League by the end of 1919, to 112 in 1969, to 191 now in 2019.

From 98 million Swiss francs raised and spent by the League and its National Societies in 1919, to over 32 billion in 2018.

From the 1920s in which the League launched appeals for aid, sent relays of disaster information to its National Societies, served as a clearing house for medical information, set up the Junior Red Cross, and established the international course in public health nursing in London

To the lean post-Wall Street Crash 1930s ... where in financially hard times it had what it called a 'post-box' role, coordinating communications between National Societies, while – with war looming again – those National Societies began first aid, ambulance and blood services ...

To its neutrality in the Second World War ... when it returned to its headquarters in neutral Switzerland, this time housing both Allied and Axis members, and it brought food and medicine to some 20 countries in Europe – again Allied and Axis – which were delivered through a Joint Relief Commission with the ICRC

To the post-war years ... as the world still hovered between war and peace. There were 60 million refugees then, and the first operation that it managed – at the request of the UN – was in 1948, running refugee camps for Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan ...

That is a sobering memory: 60 million refugees after the Second World War, and 68 million today, when we don't have a Third World War. There were refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria then – and they are still there now, where we do some of our biggest operations.

To the Fifties setting up its first relief warehouses around the world, and – as a new bi-polar American/Soviet world order took root – running refugee camps in Austria and the former Yugoslavia as Hungarians fled invasion: work for which it won a Nansen medal, specifically for supporting Hungarian refugees crossing the border into Austria. We are negotiating hard with Hungary to support refugees. There's a French statement that *L'histoire est têtue*, and we are facing all the same realities today.

To the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties ... when it saw a large influx of new National Societies from newly independent countries ... and a litany of natural disasters too long to mention, from cyclones in what is now Bangladesh in the early Seventies to the chronic drought in the Sahel of 1984-5. The World Meteorological Organisation tells us that my predecessors dealt with 40-50 natural shocks a year in the 1970s, while in 2017 it counted 450.

Almost any historical event in anyone's consciousness in those years – and in any years before or since – saw the Red Cross and Red Crescent in action. And this was often in unsung ways – for instance serving Chernobyl survivors, and screening them for thyroid cancer, long after the disaster of 1986.

The Seventies and Eighties were also the years of a reorienting of its whole nature to include and empower the countries of the South and the East.

The scale and the frequency of natural disasters has done nothing but escalate for at least 30 years: by the mid-Nineties, our programmes were reaching 20 million people a year.

The Nineties saw serious long-term planning for a truly global operation targeted at the world's most vulnerable, while the 2000s and since have seen a big focus on building on the strengths of National Societies, and disaster preparedness. Early alert, early warning, early action, as well as resilience building, so that in the places where we work communities will have the capacity to withstand the same shocks, when they come around year after year.

That's why 'building back better' was the focus of our post-Tsunami work from 2005, after we and over 100 of our National Societies raised over 3 billion Swiss francs and helped over 4.3 million people.

Most of us will more easily recall recent highlights:

... the largest single-country humanitarian operation in our history after the Haiti earthquake of 2010 ...

... a massive global support for Japan after the triple disaster at Fukushima in 2011 ...

... the saving of up to 10,000 lives when Red Cross volunteers were there on the front line in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea in 2014 and 2015, trying to contain Ebola. They were carrying out what we call 'safe and dignified' burials: the most dangerous and important task, because someone who has died of Ebola is ten times more infectious than someone who is alive with it. It was about respecting people's beliefs, and values, and their different ways of mourning and laying the bodies of their loved ones to rest. It was also about building trust in and with communities. We recast what had been known as 'Dead Body Management' to 'Safe and Dignified Burial', and we showed that humanitarianism doesn't end with the end of life: it goes beyond.

... the channelling of the Movement's (and much of the international community's) humanitarian aid through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent since 2011 ... We have been there 8 years, and we are still there, and we don't know for how long. Sometimes we measure our work in the millions of Swiss francs we spend or the thousands of metric tonnes we deliver – but in Syria we have lost 67 staff and volunteers: losing their lives to save others' lives. It's totally unacceptable, and it reminds us again how fragile our gains are, as the humanitarian space shrinks and shrinks.

... the support for millions upon millions of migrants – like Venezuela now, and all over the world: the people who have to leave home because home is no longer safe. We think of Kenya and Uganda – in the Northern Triangle in Central America – in Greece, Italy, Spain as more than a million people entered Europe in 2015 to the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, where 20 of our National Societies were involved and where we ran the only 24/7 emergency field hospital ...

... to the triple-disasters in Indonesia last year ...

... to crisis in the DRC and since yesterday in Uganda, where we are fighting another outbreak of Ebola ...

... to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique.

Friends, some of us may know some of this history; some may know only a little of it. I myself have had to learn much of it, and I have been fascinated to do so.

A simple truth emerges that we have carried out our work in times of deep and seemingly growing need. And today, we are experiencing need at a scale and magnitude that we have not seen before.

The Red Cross Red Crescent (in the words of its slogan from the 1980s) has been 'everywhere for everyone'. I often hear that you cannot be everything to everyone – but we have to be, because we have to remain relevant to people's needs, and that means we have to there all the time – before the shocks, during the shocks and after the shocks... That's the only way we can build and keep that trust in the longer term.

I hope I don't sound like the Senegalese Praise Singer? Do we feel like the soldier who overcame his humiliation listening to the pride of his forefathers? But the question is: have we fully learned from history how to shape a better future?

The League and – since 1991 – the Federation have been asking themselves existential questions about learning from the past and planning for the future for 100 years now. And we are asking them again right now, as we develop a strategy towards 2030. No one should expect that giving coherence to a global organisation would be easy.

We are many things to many people. Some see that as a problem: I don't.

A portion of a brilliant 1975 report on where we had come from and where we were going to – written by a Canadian, Donald Tansley – is a lament that the Red Cross began with a common sense of purpose that was clear to all, but then lost it.

From the 1860s until the First World War, he said, its prime purpose was tending to the sick and wounded on the battlefield.

But 'today' – whether it was Tansley talking in 1975, or us talking now in 2019 – we are caring for the victims of earthquakes, drafting humanitarian and disaster law, giving swimming lessons, reconnecting families, cleaning polluted beaches, taking blood, helping refugees and migrants at every stage of their journey, giving first aid to skiers, having cups of tea with the elderly, combatting famine, arranging holidays for the handicapped. And much much more.

I would expect nothing less of a global movement designed to help anyone in any kind of need, though I welcome the fact that we have evolved to focus more and more on those most in need – the hardest to reach in the poorest and the most difficult of places.

But maybe the question is not so much about what we do, as how relevant we are ... That is the ultimate test – and it's a test at the global level which paves the way to multilateralism.

When Henry Davison sat down with Woodrow Wilson in the White House that December night in 1918 to discuss the world after war, he put forward what he called his 'day-dream'.

He hoped that his proposed League of Red Cross Societies would become the humanitarian version of the League of Nations, which was of course the forerunner of the UN. Wilson agreed – and famously felt that he could work with, quote, 'those rather amiable gentlemen in Geneva', who were the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Davison had Wilson's full support, and it was at the Cannes Conference that he and the Japanese representative, Professor and Dr Arata Ninagawa, laid the foundations for what would become Article 25 of the League of Nations Covenant.

Article 25 said:

'The Members of the League [of Nations] agree to encourage and promote the establishment and cooperation of duly authorised voluntary national Red Cross organisations, having as purposes the improvement of health, the prevention of disease, and the mitigation of human suffering throughout the world.'

The history of that cooperation is chequered, with the League of Nations and then the UN gradually side-lining the League of Red Cross Societies – in the area of Health as I mentioned, and then bit by bit in the creation of UN agencies with a humanitarian remit.

I think there's nothing new there: sometimes you promote an idea that goes well beyond your own scope. What is important is the movement that is created on a global scale, where not only Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies but many other actors and agencies come in and play their part.

That 1948 inaugural Red Cross Palestine refugee operation which I mentioned was eventually taken over by the UN.

That reminds me of two of my friends today – one is my former deputy in this house who is running the same UNRWA operation in Gaza, and another is from the ICRC who is UN Under Secretary General and Head of UNRWA. Is that just a coincidence that they come from the Red Cross Red Crescent, or does it go back to the roots of our relationship with the UN, in which our experience was seen to be so pertinent?

In a speech on 5 May 1919, Henry Davison said:

'The consensus of opinion is that the health problems of the world can never be solved by doctors alone, nor by governments alone, but must enlist the hearty volunteer cooperation of the people themselves: and no organisation can mobilise the peoples of divergent views as can the Red Cross.'

And I think that's still valid today. Because often we go to places where health needs are great but there is no doctor, where education needs are great but there is no school, where citizens' needs are great but there is no government. Maybe that reminds us that a truly global response is more than a UN response, and a truly national response is more than a Government response.

Local humanitarian action is one of the most vibrant expressions of the multilateralism of peoples, and of a groundswell of compassion and humanity.

If you go back to the roots of the United Nations, the Charter does not invoke 'We, the government' or 'we, the nations', but 'we, the people'...

Ours is a multilateralism that crosses borders, with our Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers often working together on different sides of conflictual borders: we've seen it in all of our theatres of operation – I think recently and over the last 60 years of the Korean Peninsula, where we have organised family reunions at border crossings for those families torn apart by the war in 1953. Is this too small-scale? Or is it a powerful expression of humanity? When everything divides us, we find a space for bringing ourselves together.

So we are a union of people and principles – grounded in the communities where our volunteers and our community health workers serve the communities to which they belong. And as I said, they do it 'before, during and after'.

And our work remains totally aligned with some of the challenges of our world today, such as Migration, a preoccupation for the League ever since it came to the assistance of the population movements brought on by the Russian Revolution.

It has seen us accompany those displaced by the colossal movements all over the world after 1945 – through Hungary in the 50s as I mentioned, Algeria and the Congo in the 60s, Vietnamese Boat People in the 70s, Palestinians, Lebanese and Rwandans in the 80s, to people moving across the Balkans in the 90s – to the present day with people leaving Syria and trying to get to Greece and to Europe.

Nowadays we may think we have a migration crisis of people coming into the European continent, but – if we think about it – the largest numbers of people on the move want to stay near to home, so as to be able to return home.

So one third of the Lebanese population is composed of refugees; there are one million refugees in a small country like Jordan; three million in Turkey; one million in Uganda; one million in Ethiopia. These are single countries, and they have more refugees than a single continent like Europe.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is real multilateralism at work, globally and locally. It's what we must do our utmost to preserve and to grow, in a world of aching need.

It's why I'm proud to play my small part in this great global good that celebrates its 100th birthday this year. It's why I want the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to continue doing good, and doing it better.

One last time, I go back to 1919 again, when Henry Davison said at the Cannes Conference that: 'The world is bleeding, and it needs help now'.

Today the world is still bleeding. It still needs help right now, and it is people like the nearly 14 million volunteers of the Red Cross and Red Crescent who can provide that help.

We embody a multilateralism of people and values – and we are driven by the one collective humanity which is – I think and hope you'll agree – all that we share.

We are there for the community of carers, and what a privilege it is to be part of that community. I humbly stand here today – just as I did in the Cannes Conference – and I pinch myself, asking if it's real: am I really this lucky and privileged to be part of the journey that started 100 years ago?

A journey that has been tested over time, and withstood many challenges, and always been so relevant.

And where do we get our inspiration from? Of course it's from our history – and I can't thank you enough for coming together and taking us back to our sources of inspiration: not just priding ourselves about what has been achieved, but using it as a source of motivation and courage to do more, to do better, and to enjoy – each and every day – our privilege to serve.

Thank you very much for being with us, and for accompanying us.

Thank you.



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