The Humanitarian Centre Inaugural Lecture

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"Managing at senior levels in the Red Cross:
The challenge of maintaining relevance and credibility"

I.   Introduction:

It is a great honour to be asked to speak at this event to mark the official launch of the Humanitarian Centre. As many of you will know, the Humanitarian Centre is a hub organisation supporting over 20 local initiatives involved in international relief and development work. It is thus fitting that I will talk about what an organisation like the Red Cross – but also others involved in international relief and development – can do to maintain relevance and credibility in their humanitarian work.

II.   Brief outline of the scope of the work the RC is involved with internationally:

Let me briefly set the scene by describing the Red Cross and what it actually does.

British Red Cross is one of 185 National Societies, which is one essential component of the Red Cross Movement. The other two are the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), both Geneva based.

In very general terms, the Red Cross works in three key areas:
- Helping vulnerable people in need prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters and conflict – recent examples obviously include the tsunami, the Pakistan earthquake, the Niger food insecurity crisis as well as the Middle East conflict or indeed, closer to home, floods in Carlisle.
- As an auxiliary to governments, Helping vulnerable people to address health and social care crises. On the international level this is for instance about HIV – with 40 million people living with HIV arguably one of the biggest if not the biggest crisis of our times – tuberculosis, malaria
- Promoting effective application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL): some of you will have heard about the Geneva conventions: a body of international law created to amongst other things to protect for example civilians in war and prisoners of war

In relation to IHL, it is perhaps not so widely known that quietly behind the scenes the ICRC visits thousands of prisoners around the world in very difficult circumstances.   It may perhaps also not be so widely known that in 2006, here in the UK we recruited 236 peer educators to help run Red Cross projects and attracted hundreds of new young volunteers. We also trained 200 school speakers to give presentations on challenging themes – such as child soldiers and refugees – at schools across the UK. And we

provided specialist support to 500 teachers to help them promote citizenship issues in the classroom.

Last summer, we launched *Raid Cross*, a new activity game that helps young people understand how international humanitarian law can help save lives during a conflict. Across the UK, hundreds of schoolchildren got a chance to act out prisoner and soldier roles in an imaginary conflict, and learn valuable lessons about the moral difficulties of war.

We also directly engaged with young people on current, sensitive issues. In Scotland, for example, we ran a nationwide schools competition that encouraged secondary pupils to better understand the plight of refugees.

But this is not supposed to be a commercial for the Red Cross, so let me move on by outlining some of the

III.   Challenges and trends in our humanitarian work that affect our ability to stay relevant and credible

1) One of these is the increasing complexity of disasters, their scale as well as neglect of conflicts and disasters.

Related to natural disasters, both Aceh and New Orleans showed a scale of disaster that we have not seen in a long time, if ever. It also appears to us that there are issues around their increased frequency, perhaps linked to climate change.

Chronic conflicts like the Middle East, Sierra Leone, DR Congo are basically impossible to understand, and as a result it is almost impossible to define a clear role for humanitarian agencies.

Polarisation and "radicalisation" of the world. This on the one hand has led to us being sucked into response to humanitarian needs caused by the manifestations of the global war on terror / jihad e.g. in Iraq, 9/11, Madrid, London. As importantly, it is changing the nature of security risks, which are, of course, inherent to humanitarian action. The "with us or against us" discourse of the global war on terror makes humanitarian action more likely to be perceived as part of the political agenda.

There appears to be increased complexity with natural disasters happening in conflict environments, e.g. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan

Another important aspect of the complexity we face are forgotten or neglected disasters: these include the long lasting conflicts I have mentioned as well as food insecurity in Africa and infectious diseases such as malaria, HIV and AIDS and TB, which kill 13 million a year. The key challenges for us remaining relevant and credible in this respect are whether we are ready for the long haul, and whether we are able to generate sustainable resource flows for our work for example against HIV.

2) Level of violence against international humanitarian workers and national staff
reached its highest level in a decade in 2006 according to numerous sources including the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and Britain's Overseas Development Institute

(ODI). A total of 83 humanitarian aid workers were killed with 78 wounded and 52 kidnapped, including over 30 members and volunteers of the Iraqi Red Crescent (IRCS) when they were abducted by gunmen from the IRCS main office in Baghdad on December 17th. According to the latest information over 16 of those abducted in Baghdad are still missing but others have been released.

The majority of humanitarian aid worker deaths occurred in Afghanistan with 25 killed followed by 23 in Sri Lanka and 15 in Sudan. The majority of violence directed at humanitarian aid workers, including deaths, occurs to national staff workers. The most violent attack happened in 2006 in eastern Sri Lanka where 17 national staff members of the French humanitarian agency Action Contre La Faim were killed in a single attack.

I am not mentioning this to scare anyone off, but to highlight that this is part of the reality of humanitarian work, and that it is very challenging in such circumstances to deliver something that is relevant.

It is perhaps thus not surprising that we see a growing tendency from humanitarian actors to **accept military or other armed escorts** in highly insecure environments (deterrence approach) as opposed to developing trust amongst the host community and maintaining dialogue with all parties (acceptance approach).

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has clear regulations on the subject of "**providing military protection for humanitarian workers**". In 1995 the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent adopted a resolution entitled "Principles and action in international humanitarian assistance and protection" which as a general rule excludes recourse to armed protection of humanitarian operations.

From our point of view all military actors run the risk of not being perceived as neutral. And, if the military actors are also parties to an armed conflict, they will be even less likely to be perceived as neutral.

We have defined some **"absolute limits"** such as
- Never to accept armed planes or trucks or boats. An example: in Pakistan, the Red Cross used some military planes but all arms removed, even though military markings stayed. But crew not armed, because…
- Never to accept armed personnel manning such forms of transport
- Never to use military assets because it is the easy option

Our Movement guidelines also set out the **exceptional conditions** under which armed protection may be requested. Exceptions are ONLY considered acceptable when this is the only viable option, and the only way to save lives. In a nutshell, armed escorts should really only be used where there is a general breakdown of law and order. Among the few examples where the Movement has done this is in Somalia, as well as the former Yugoslavia.

Another example is in the northern Caucasus, where the ICRC has been left with no other choice than to accept armed protection provided by Russian security forces to safeguard and render possible the movement of its delegates. In contrast, the ICRC in Iraq refused armed escorts from the occupying power. These two examples illustrate well that there are often no clear-cut answers and difficult choices to be made.

3) Increasing number of actors in the sector

Let me first of all point out that there is an overall annual aid flow of roughly 18 billion US$; and that this increasingly comes from private sources including companies and philanthropists like Bill Gates, who set up their own implementation mechanisms. In 2005 British public gave £460 million to the DEC. A diversification of resources potentially gives us more operational independence, but we need to acknowledge the clear capacity and management challenges we face in translating substantial amounts of money entrusted to us into credible action…

On to the issue of increased numbers of actors in our sector: According to the ODI, there were 240,000 humanitarian agencies at last count world -wide. We thus cannot pretend that – hopefully healthy – competition is not an issue for us.

Where this gets potentially murkier, is in the area of our relationships with governments and their aid budgets. While it is not our purpose as Red Cross to speak out on whether the current geopolitical situation is right or wrong, we do see it as our responsibility to work towards the focus of aid and assistance being about humanitarian crises, and particularly those ignored because they don't figure in international agendas.

Another significant actor in the humanitarian arena is the military. Hilary Benn's speech at the United Nations in New York in January 2006 on *"Humanitarian and conflict reform – an emergency service for the world"* refers to the vital role of military assets in the provision of humanitarian assistance after recent disasters. We are observing a trend towards increasing use of military assets in response to natural disasters, for instance in the responses to the Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the South Asian earthquake. While recognising that is appropriate in particular circumstances to reinforce the humanitarian capacity, we have concerns over the use of military assets becoming a 'default' position. We urge that this should be exceptional and a last resort, as stated for instance in the OCHA "Oslo guidelines[1]".

Where we do decide to use military assets, **we would seek to "neutralise" the asset**, i.e. bring it under "civilian control". To give you an example: for aid flights in Darfur the ICRC gave out guidelines that included requirements to
- Display the RC emblem
- Cover armed forces' insignia
- Remove all weaponry
- Personnel in civilian dress and unarmed

IV   What can we do?

Against all these challenges, what is it that we can do to maintain relevance and credibility? I would like to touch on four possible sets of actions:

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[1] "Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief", United Nations, DHA Geneva, May 1994 (updated in November 2006)

(a) The importance of local actors

We must never forget that it is always local individuals and communities that not only suffer, but that makes the first response. There are 2 sets of activities that are not always easy to "sell":

- Disaster response / Disaster Preparedness vital. Simple measures eg Bangladesh
- Supporting the capacity building of local organisations. Donors more often than not want programmes not salaries or infrastructure.

But we must continue to make the case for both of these!

(b) The challenge of defining the "bottom line" and being fully accountable

I do not need to dwell on the importance of defining clearly what we are trying to achieve and reporting back against that. There is a "bottom line" for us, and it is about making a demonstrable difference in the lives of vulnerable people. Much work remains to be done in terms of getting the balance right between quantitative and qualitative measures of success.

It seems to be that there is an increasing focus in some debates on who is holding us accountable and how we are governed. In this country we have the Charity Commission that does some noteworthy and credible work in this respect. And in quite a few environments there is talk about accreditation processes for NGOs. While we are nervous in the sector about this – related to who should undertake accreditation (governments?) and preserving independent space for civil society actors – it appears to me inevitable and right that we not only sign up to standards like the Red Cross Code of Good Practice, but that we accept the establishment of a mechanism that monitors and sanctions our performance against agreed standards.

Another aspect of being accountable is how we engage with our supporters in a meaningful and possibly democratic way.   We, of course, have our own Governance structure, i.e. a Board of Trustees who hold us in management to account on behalf of our volunteers as well as to some extent on behalf of other stakeholders (as we have appointed trustees);

However, is that governance process good enough when we have 8 out 10 people giving to us for the tsunami (and very high numbers of others disasters like Pakistan or Niger): how do we dialogue and get agreement about what we are doing and any changes to donor intent?

Good example of MSF around the tsunami: MSF UK stopped its emergency response fundraising for the Asian tsunami when donations hit £700,000 on December 31 and instead started directing donors elsewhere

Apart from our own governance processes it thus seems important that we are as honest and transparent as possible and in a responsible manner use means such as the media and publicly available reports to give feedback and engage with our supporter base;

c) The importance of leadership and people

- The importance of good leadership cannot be overemphasised. A management guru once told me that the following three factors are key to explaining good leadership: employ better people: give trust before it is earned: put your feet up by 12 noon to think. My sense is that many of us in our sector are quite good at the first, not so good at the second and completely lousy at the third!

    - Complexity of response – ownership houses communities livelihoods requires some professionalising -> Skill and science – not truck and chuck; BUT -> danger of becoming risk averse…

    - o Is the future more about social anthropologists or technical skills -> solid technical skills needed as well as the passion for and subscription to our principles and values

    - o If you are good at doing something useful in your own country, you may wish to try it abroad…

d) Protecting the space of Independent and Neutral humanitarian action

Allow me to destroy the myth that holding on to the principle of neutrality leads to indifference or not taking a stand. The principle of neutrality does not prevent the Red Cross from being involved. We do not remain a bystander, but take sides for the vulnerable, especially those neglected by the world's media. Neutrality is about guaranteeing access to those who need assistance; example Lebanon, where we were able to work on all sides of the conflict: in Lebanon itself; in Israel; in the Gaza and West Bank; in Syria

It is our responsibility to refocus debates and humanitarian action so that they are delinked from political agendas and focused on violence and suffering in the countries and the communities that need us most and not to let any government drive the agenda on where public attention should be.

At a much smaller, perhaps less significant, but at the end of the day equally important level, we can work towards this in our daily lives. The key British Red Cross campaign here in the UK last year was titled "Don't be a Bystander". It was about encouraging people not to walk by accidents and people in need, but to for instance equip yourself with lifesaving First aid skills and helping. And I have already mentioned our humanitarian action and refugee services work.

V. In summary, we can stay relevant and credible by

- Honouring and respecting that community resilience is vital. What local individuals and communities achieve in disasters and international aid work is basically just complementary
- Being very transparent about what we are doing and working towards full accountability both towards back donors, the general public and the so-called "beneficiaries"
- Providing appropriate leadership and recruiting good people

- Rising above divides and building bridges. We can do this by staying neutral in terms of not siding with any of the parties to conflict. In general, international NGOs and actors like the Red Cross must reassert their role in providing an impartial and independent voice calling for desperate humanitarian needs to be met

I thank you for your attention, and wish the Humanitarian Centre and all those involved with it only the very best in its noble endeavours to make our sector a better one!