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Statement by

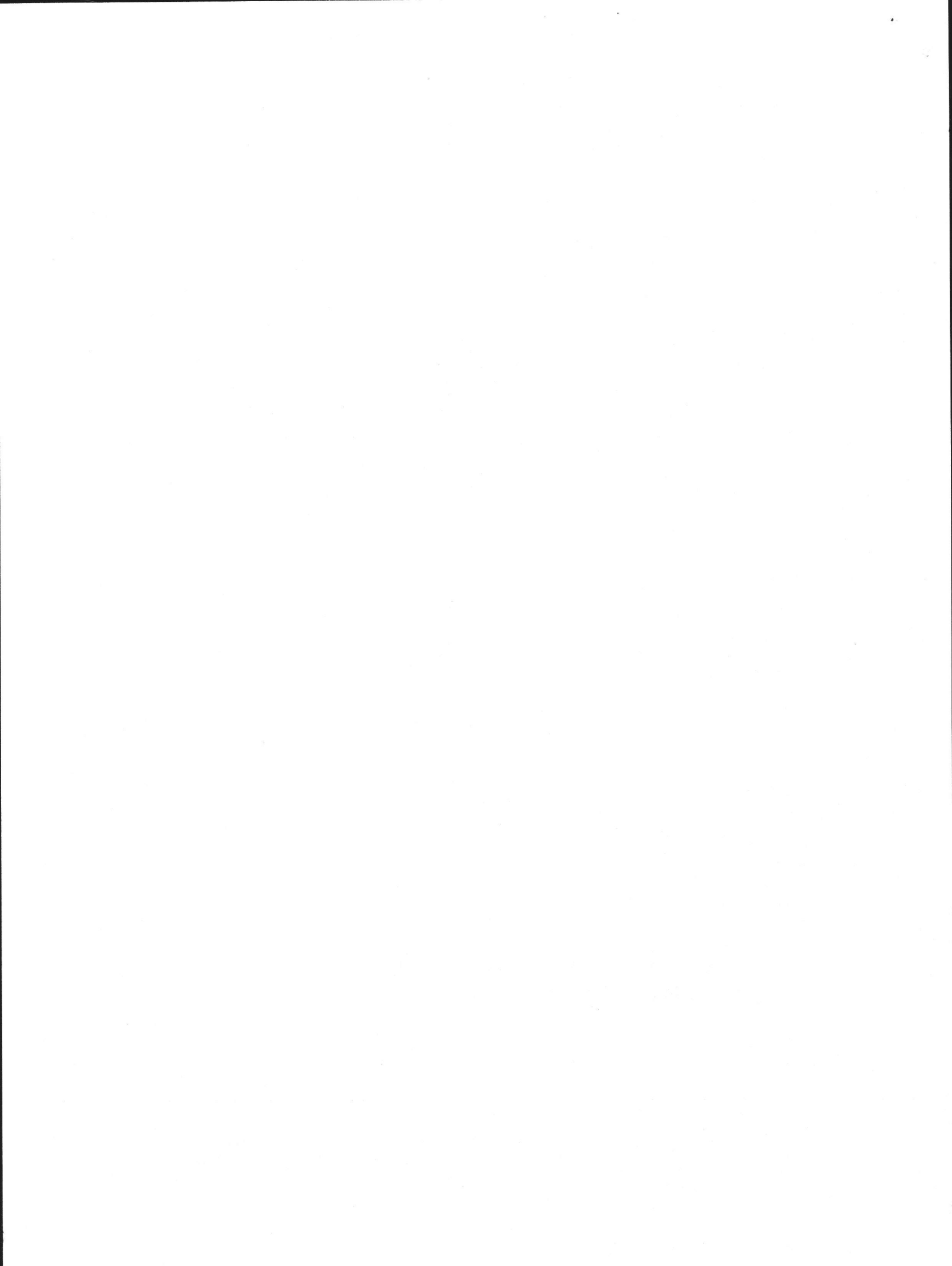
Mr Markku Niskala
Secretary General

At High-level Segment

**INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES**

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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS – 61st session

HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT

Statement by Mr Markku Niskala, Secretary-General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Chair,

We join all other delegations which have welcomed Louise Arbour to her responsibility as High Commissioner for Human Rights. Her work is, of course, well-known to us all, and we at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies look forward to maintaining a strong working relationship with her and the Office in the years ahead.

We intend to intervene in debate on several items during this Session, but this High Level Segment provides a good opportunity to sketch the dimensions of our concern for human rights, the relationship of the Commission's work to Principles and Values of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which are a cornerstone of our mandate.

This segment also provides, however, an opportunity to show our view of the interrelationship of several important world events to human rights and humanitarian values. Recent events have made this interrelationship very clear, but they are an established part of our agenda and have been adopted as such by Governments and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. This took place, as the Commission will be aware, in December 2003 at the 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, when it adopted the Agenda for Humanitarian Action.

Anti-Discrimination and Disaster Preparedness

The recent World Conference on Disaster Reduction, held in January 2005 in Kobe, Hyogo in Japan, was an opportunity to build a much better understanding among governments, international organisations and civil society of the critical importance of community resilience.

Community resilience, or the ability of communities to preserve their economic, social and cultural values even in times of the worst adversity, is now recognised as the underpinning for all effective work to prepare for and rebuild after disasters.

Community resilience depends, as the experience of our worldwide network of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies shows, on the ability of whole communities to work together. Without discrimination of any kind. And with the full empowerment of all people in the communities.

This means that community resilience, and disaster preparedness and disaster response, and recovery afterwards, needs the contribution of the work of this Commission. There

are, sadly, still too many countries where discriminatory traditions and practices sap the strength of communities and deprive them of the resilience which is essential to their preparedness.

One example of why this is so important is Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, working as the auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, has been managing the country's Cyclone Preparedness Programme since 1972. It is managed alongside the Community-Based Disaster Preparedness Programme and programme activities reach every village, every community, in the areas prone to cyclones. These activities are designed to reach to all the people in those areas. With no distinction based on ethnic background, gender, social status or any other ingredient.

The result is that Bangladesh has one of the world's most effective disaster preparedness and response systems. The programs, and the partnerships which have been built with government and international organisations like the World Food Programme, have produced a remarkable turnaround in damage and loss of life. 2004 saw the worst cyclone season for decades, with 36 million people affected. Yet only 747 lives were lost.

The comparison, which shows the absolute importance of a community-based disaster preparedness program incorporating the whole community without discrimination, is the loss of half a million lives in the Great Cyclone of 1970. That terrible event was the catalyst for the modern programs.

To be successful, such programs have to become part of the culture. They have to be part of the daily lives of all the people, everywhere. They have to be backed by active government support, and of course there must be active and sustained community involvement.

Increasing diversity is a highly relevant component of the Pledge delivered by the International Federation at the 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2003. Our experience, consistent with the Pledge and our Principles, is that increasing the diversity disaster preparedness teams improves the capacity of the teams to identify, represent and address the needs of the whole community. For example, women volunteers organised by the Bangladesh Red Crescent are a strong force in the country's preparedness for disasters.

Many outcomes beyond straightforward disaster preparedness come from this approach, as Bangladesh has found. The strength of communities is felt economically, and the empowerment of women and marginalised populations contributes to growth and development. These are among the reasons why we in the International Federation see effective community-based disaster preparedness as a valuable component supporting the achievement of many other objectives, including Millennium Development Goal 1 on the reduction of poverty.

This, for us in the Red Cross Red Crescent, is a practical illustration of why human rights and programs that combat discrimination are so essential.

Health and Care

We are working, in the International Federation and throughout our Red Cross and Red Crescent National Society network, for the same level of engagement between government and the community as we now find we can develop in our disaster preparedness and response work.

Even though there is still much to be done in the disasters field – as the Kobe Conference demonstrated – there is at least a strong realisation, and a commitment. We will be working to put concrete targets and timelines alongside that commitment, but a good part of the job has been done.

This is not yet true of the struggle against the appalling disaster of HIV/AIDS.

Everybody working to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic knows that no investment in treatment or medical care can reach the bulk of the most vulnerable unless there is an active campaign against stigma and discrimination. This is a task which encompasses vulnerability reduction in the fullest sense of the term.

HIV/AIDS, probably more than any other modern disease, is surrounded by uninformed yet powerful stigma. This has many consequences, but the saddest of all is the reluctance of people who are infected with the virus to come forward for treatment.

Commitments are frequently delivered by governments in terms of aid programs, and with language which implies that HIV/AIDS is something foreign, something which happens to other people.

One of the key outcomes of the September 2004 Pan-African Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies was the adoption of the Algiers Plan of Action which reinforces commitments already made in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. Three of the five most pressing priorities for Africa relate to this work, and call for the massive scaling up of effective prevention programs.

This outcome was brought to the attention of the United Nations General Assembly in October 2004, and the Algiers Plan was tabled as a United Nations document by the Government of Algeria as A/59/674.

I will not go into detail with examples, but one country that stands out for its commitment to work against stigma as part of an integrated package of programs against HIV/AIDS is Mozambique. There, the Red Cross Society has developed an intensive program using community resources, volunteers and government support. It brings together prevention,

community-based care for People Living with HIV/AIDS and an advocacy campaign against stigma and discrimination.

Similar priority for HIV/AIDS in the International Federation's statement on 8 March 2005 to the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. In both contexts work against stigma was identified as a key priority for the international community, and it is important that the Commission on Human Rights takes up its leadership opportunity on this issue in the United Nations system.

Chair, permit me to simplify our requests, through you and the Commission, to the international community as a whole.

What we want is a targeted commitment from governments to work against HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases both at home and abroad. We want governments to acknowledge that HIV/AIDS threatens any and all communities, and threatens the economic, social and cultural world we live in.

We want fresh attention, at the highest levels, to the threat HIV/AIDS poses to national and international peace and security.

We want those affected by the disease - all those people living with it - to enjoy life in dignity and with the ability to make their best contribution to the communities in which they live.

We want risk and impact reduction programs to be matched with programs which ensure that vulnerability is recognised, and fully addressed by effective programs. In communities, in education, in laws and policies. And in all locations, including prisons.

This is a lot to ask, even now and 20 years after the world first became aware of the disease. For, unfortunately, much of what has been said by governments and national leaders has not been backed by action which empowers people living with AIDS and enables them to contribute to the struggle.

This, is where the Commission on Human Rights has a role. An effective anti-stigma campaign is essential to halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

We in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, with our members in virtually every community in the world, ask this Commission to accept what is probably the biggest human rights challenge of today - to engage seriously in the struggle against HIV/AIDS by tackling the threat posed by continued stigmatization.

Chair,

As my remarks have made clear, it is not possible for governments to succeed in building community resilience in disaster situations or communities empowered through the removal of stigma without alliances and partnerships with the communities themselves.

This, in a curious sense, is part of the flowering of the civil and political rights agenda which occupies so much of the time of the international community. But the fact is that civil, political, economic, social, cultural and all other human rights are indivisible and interdependent. Everyone, and every institution, has a responsibility to help secure a world at peace where people can live in dignity and prosperity.

Our role, through the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, is to help partner that search. We have the unique characteristic of being, in every country, the partner to government through the status of our National Societies as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field.

This is why we see such value in developing fresh partnership opportunities through links between National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and National Human Rights Institutions.

I very much hope it will be possible to devote more detailed time to this later in the Session under the agenda item on National Institutions. But, in brief, our message will be that we in the International Federation are ready to proceed with the signing of an agreement with the Office of the High Commissioner aimed at encouraging collaboration between National Institutions and National Societies.

The drafting of the agreement was initiated when Mary Robinson was High Commissioner. It proceeded quickly with the encouragement of our dear friend Sergio Vieira de Mello, and would have been signed in late 2003. Now, however, we are delighted that the High Commissioner has included a reference to this action in her report to the Commission on National Institutions, and I look forward to discussing with her the finalisation of this stage of this important work.

Chair,

I referred to recent events and their impact on our work at the outset of this statement.

Disasters are not often considered in the same agenda frame as human rights, but I hope my comments on the World Conference on Disaster Reduction have demonstrated the point.

The International Federation had the honour to deliver one of the closing statements at that Conference. When we did so we expressed our concern that the commitments were not backed either by targets or timetables, and said we would take up that issue in all relevant conferences.

Now, with the additional urgency provided by the experience the world has shared through response to the Asian earthquakes and tsunamis, the issue is all the more relevant. Much of the suffering experienced by people resulted from too little warning, and inadequate warning systems.

Our experience is that even the most sophisticated technology must be backed by community involvement, trained volunteers, and a willingness of people to work together to live and survive. This is what we said at the Mauritius International Meeting for Small Island Developing States, as well as in the major Ministerial meetings on the Tsunami.

It is also what we have concentrated on in our own meetings. There have been several, at different levels, and the message has been consistent:

Disaster preparedness and response depends for its effectiveness on the involvement of communities.

Effective work against the HIV/AIDS pandemic requires the involvement of those affected by and living with the disease.

Our message here is that the Commission on Human Rights has an equally important responsibility to build an enabling environment for that community involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of all programs relevant to these objectives.

With that kind of environment in place, human rights are assured. Human Rights are not an end in themselves – they are the means which secure peace, prosperity and human dignity, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is in that spirit that we look forward to completing our agreement with the High Commissioner and facilitating action and coherent collaboration between our National Societies and their counterpart National Human Rights Institutions.

Thank you.