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**Speech by Micheline Calmy-Rey  
President of the Swiss Confederation  
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**At the opening ceremony of the  
31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

**Geneva**

**Monday 28 November 2011**

*Check against delivery*

**President of the International Committee of the Red Cross,  
President of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies,  
President of the Standing Commission,  
Excellencies,  
Representatives of the Governments and of the National Societies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**I would first of all like to express my great pleasure to be in your company for the opening of the 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.**

**Your presence in this room today is a clear demonstration of the universality of humanitarian principles, principles that were initially inspired by the humanism and altruism of a small group of pioneers, and on which world humanitarian action, in particular the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, is founded.**

**The two main objectives of the Conference are to strengthen international humanitarian law, on the one hand, and humanitarian action, on the other.**

**These two objectives have never been more relevant than they are today. Humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly complex because armed conflicts have become more intensified and involve an important number of actors because the frequency of natural, man-made and environmental disasters is rising, and because the impact, regularity and accumulation of destructive forces are affecting a growing number of victims.**

**Somalia is a tragic example of this. The violence ravaging in this country with an intensity hardly seen elsewhere for more than 20 years is being compounded by exceptionally severe climatic conditions. In this situation, the work of humanitarian organisations is becoming increasingly difficult as a result of worsening security, growing humanitarian needs and regular challenges to humanitarian access.**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Nowadays, wars are no longer fought on faraway battlefields, but in the middle of inhabited areas. Civilian populations are exposed more than ever to the horrendous consequences of this development. Switzerland, which has made respect for the promotion and implementation of international humanitarian law a constancy of its foreign policy, has adopted over several years a strategy for protecting civilians as part of a coherent and effective policy of protection. As a result, Switzerland has not**

only strengthened the efficiency of its multilateral and bilateral action but also its capacity both to respond better to the challenges of protecting civilians during armed conflict and to ensure more respect for human dignity and civil rights.

Another major challenge is humanitarian access. This has been acknowledged in the report entitled “International humanitarian law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts”. Promoting rapid and unhindered humanitarian access is an absolute priority, in particular because we have witnessed a serious deterioration in the last ten years. In armed conflicts today, securing and maintaining humanitarian access has become increasingly difficult. A response at the operational level alone would be futile. Political means and an argumentation based on law are essential. Switzerland has taken concerted action together with a number of partners at the political, legal and operational levels to promote humanitarian access to population groups affected by armed conflicts. It has recently launched an initiative on humanitarian access in situations of armed conflict with the aim of placing practical instruments at the disposal of national authorities, international organisations, and humanitarian actors on the ground. The theme of humanitarian access will be amply debated within the Commission on international humanitarian law.

Humanitarian actors are aware that they need to work together and be innovative in order to provide a more effective response to current challenges. Switzerland has encouraged the work of all the components of the Movement, which continues to adapt its humanitarian response to ensure the protection of victims.

In this respect, I would like to mention two initiatives of the Movement that aim to promote high-quality, rapid and effective humanitarian aid: the first one is an initiative of the Federation. It developed a set of guidelines with the aim of encouraging the States to adapt their domestic legislation to facilitate accepting international aid in the event of a disaster. The other one came from the ICRC, who created in 2006, a rapid deployment unit which has enabled it to react at very short notice and strengthen its teams in the event of major crises.

These initiatives have been launched within the framework of international, national and regional efforts – which is a very important parameter since the local communities are the first to come to the rescue of their relatives and neighbours when disaster strikes or violent conflict breaks out. The National Societies subscribe fully to this effort of solidarity and proximity. The added value of their work derives in particular from their familiarity with the local context.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**In view of the constantly changing nature of contemporary humanitarian challenges, it is crucial that all the members of this conference act together in a spirit of respect for the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, and confront the needs created by current crises and conflicts.**

**The principal challenge of international humanitarian law is to improve its implementation not only by States but also by non-state actors. In this light, international criminal justice has without doubt made a considerable contribution to the fight against impunity. Nevertheless, violations of international humanitarian law are still occurring far too often. As reaffirmed by the ICRC in its report entitled “Strengthening legal protection for victims of armed conflicts”, a process of reflection on strengthening International Humanitarian Law and developing mechanisms specifically capable of stopping such violations is needed.**

**It was acknowledged at the Conference “Sixty years of the Geneva Conventions and the decades ahead”, which Switzerland co-hosted with the ICRC in November 2009, that further deliberation is urgently needed on the implementation of international humanitarian law, including its mechanisms. In keeping with its humanitarian tradition and its longstanding commitment to international humanitarian law, Switzerland has declared its willingness to facilitate discussions on the implementation of international humanitarian law. It is in fact Switzerland’s understanding that in light of the opinion of the States, the question of respect for international humanitarian law should be given priority treatment and that the High Contracting Parties should pursue and deepen this debate in a more structured and systematic manner. The moment has come for the High Contracting Parties to work together to find specific and practical means to ensure respect for international humanitarian law.**

**To achieve this, Switzerland, in co-operation with the ICRC, has launched a process to facilitate discussions between the High Contracting Parties with the aim of identifying concrete means to improve and strengthen the application of international humanitarian law.**

**It is extremely important to strengthen dialogue not only between the States but also with the other actors concerned because, in contrast to other bodies of law, there is no specific forum for addressing questions of international humanitarian law application on a regular basis. A discussion every four years at this unique conference is essential and indispensable but it is not enough.**

**This is why Switzerland hopes that everyone will be able to identify with this initiative and support it. We have an obligation to respect and to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and it is time to give more substance to this obligation. We owe it to too many victims of armed conflict.**

**The growing humanitarian needs of civilian populations, resulting in particular from the growing complexity of armed conflicts and the multiplication of natural and man-made disasters have led us to examine more closely than ever the serious challenges that are facing us. Convening under the banner of "Our World. Your Move – For Humanity", it is our responsibility to humanity to engage in a constructive debate and to make commitments and decisions that will obtain the concrete results to improve both the protection of the victims of armed conflicts and humanitarian action.**

**This conference will also be an opportunity to address a question to which Switzerland has dedicated much effort – the implementation of the memorandum of understanding between Magen David Adom and the Palestine Red Crescent as well as an Agreement on the Operational Arrangements. The Monitor has submitted its report. It mentions that important progress has been achieved but that not all obligations have been implemented. It is now for the Conference to pronounce itself on the basis of what have been decided at the Council of Delegates. To this end, Switzerland wishes to reaffirm that the objective of these two agreements is humanitarian and not political. It is important that we keep this perspective in mind when we decide how to follow up on this question. Switzerland is convinced that a decision to this question can be reached by consensus.**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

**I wish you every success in your work in the coming days. I am convinced that the results of the 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference will come up to our expectations as well as of those of the millions of victims for whom we can and must make a difference.**

**Thank you for your attention.**