Dihad – Key note speech on migration

Distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and great pleasure for me to be here today to address this annual international Aid & Development conference and to have the opportunity to share the views from an humanitarian perspective with you, to have an open and frank dialogue on the challenges we humanitarians face and on what possible solutions and priorities we can set to address them. I was invited to speak about migration, a topic that is high in the humanitarian agenda, a topic we can and we must not ignore. And when we address migration, the only way to do so must be to protect the people on the move. We need to preserve human dignity and we must never forget that No Human Being is Illegal!

Migration, and the suffering of the millions and millions of people on the move – from all around the world, is a key topic for all of us. Migration was with us in the past, it accompanies us today, and migration is a phenomenon that we will continue to face also in the next decade due to a number of reasons - protracted crisis, conflicts, food insecurity, and climate change, to mention a few of the circumstances that will influence migration massively.

Migration is not an emergency as someone, mainly in the western countries, are quick to say. Today, we live the largest global population movement since world war 2. This cannot be addressed as an emergency. These arguments may go down in politics, but it is never how we as humanitarians address this issue. We are of the opinion that if we really want to save lives and protect human dignity, we do need to have a long-term approach to migration influxes, tackling root causes and putting every possible policy in place to minimize human suffering.
Last December, in Marrakech, most of the States signed finally the Global Compact on Migration. This agreement was an important step toward a global and consistent approach to people on the move. What happened in Morocco was very important, because it gave us a new framework that replaces the current global approach to migration that simply does not work.

The Global Compact is an opportunity, for states and those who regulate migration, to fix a global approach to migration that is simply, and painfully, broken. And the Global Compact is an important framework to protect the lives and the human dignity of people on the move.

Too many people are suffering.

Too many children face abuse and violence.

Too many people are dying every day.

This is unacceptable – and only together we will be able to change this situation.

Now, a few months into the finalisation and adoption to of the text it is time to start a frank discussion on what is happening on the field: is the situation becoming better? Are people on the move suffering less? Are we able to save more lives? Can we ensure that people dignity is ensured?

I don’t want to be naïve: I know that the situation cannot change overnight, but I think it is important to have a frank dialogue on it.

The Global Compact was an important first step but now we must stay focused on the implementation. We need to stop putting people on the move between two, equally unacceptable, decisions: stay in a place where famine, violence, food insecurity, conflict, consequences of climate change, will put their life at risk, or escape from their country and start a unsafe journey where the exposure
of being trafficked, sold as slave, or in danger of losing your life is high. This is unacceptable!

At this very moment - now - millions of people are possibly in danger on one of the different and perilous migratory routes all around the world. Migrants, especially when in an irregular situation, are particularly vulnerable to sufferance, exploitation, human trafficking. Every day our Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers are witnessing, in different contexts and in different scenarios, the sufferance, the exploitation and the violence that people on the move face, everywhere, all around the world, on every migratory trail.

Most probably even now, while I am speaking, thousands of people are exploited or in suffering only to find a safe place where to stay. A few weeks ago, I was in Venezuela, a country where the humanitarian needs are growing daily. More than 3 million Venezuelans left their country in search for food, health care, medicines, in hope for finding a sustainable future.

The Red Cross volunteers are present at the border and in strategic places along of the migration trails to support the migrants with health care, food medicines and last but not least information.

To us in the humanitarian sector information is also seen as aid giving the opportunity to people to take an informed decision on the journey is key.

In all our operations we do our best to share information about opportunities to people on the move and help them receive information about the country they are in, about legal status, how they can access necessary services and where they can get support. In Niger, Bangladesh, Italy, Central Asia, Philippines or in the Maldives, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are supporting vulnerable migrants in every way possible. Our women and men on the field are eye
witnessing everywhere in the world that the provision of correct and adequate information is a crucial part of helping people on the move to attempt a life in dignity in the place they – voluntary or not - choose to stay.

At the end of 2018, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent produced the report “Alone and Unsafe” that focuses on the unacceptable exposure of unaccompanied and separated migrant children to sexual and gender-based violence.

The true scale of this hidden crisis is unclear, but the key figures know are horrific: 300,000 children migrated alone or without their families in 2017 – 5 times more than 2012 and we believe that the numbers of unaccompanied minors is likely to be much higher now.

These children are easy prey for abusers, exploiters and traffickers. When children are in transit alone or without their families, they are at very high risk of being assaulted, sexually abused, raped, trafficked into sexual exploitation, or forced into “survival sex”. We cannot accept this.

Governments and humanitarian organizations have a blind spot when it comes to protecting and helping unaccompanied and separated children. Identification, screening and referral systems for at risk children and survivors of sexual violence and exploitation rarely exist. These systems must be put in place.

When we talk about making migration safer, we must first prioritize making it safer for these children who are truly the most vulnerable.

The situation is very complex, and we cannot keep silent in front of the suffering of millions and millions of people. I perfectly know that currently we are missing
on one hand, a multilateral approach to complex issues, and on the other hand, the interest in humanity and vulnerable people.

It is very sad for me to speak like this. Nowadays for a large number of countries, at least the European and Western ones, it is better to externalize borders and push back the migration issue. In the EU we seem to think that we can push the problem to the non-EU countries, a sad but also very short-sighted approach. We close the eyes to the auctions and modern slavery in Libya, to women forced to prostitution, to kids disappearing in the hands of inhumane and illegal networks. And through media we are told that migrants are not arriving anymore and that this will solve the problem. And that’s it.

The International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies believes that every government has the right to set its own policies and to protect its own border. However, we do not believe that they do not have the right to implement those policies in a way that increases vulnerability and suffering.

We cannot accept that death, violence, rape, child detention – much of it entirely preventable – can be used as a preventive measure that stops people from migrating.

We are present in 191 countries with our Red Cross Red Crescent national societies, we can have a clear and crucial role in every country of origin, transit and destination.

We want to work with governments to create a network of “humanitarian service points” (also known as safe spaces or information points) where migrants can access basic services and information, without fear of reprisal. We run this service points already in many places, for example in Mexico, Niger, Italy, Sweden and Austria. We need support from states because for these
points to be truly effective, they must be “firewalled and protected” from immigration services. We see time and again that vulnerable migrants – including children – will not come to us for help if they fear that by doing so, they will be arrested and returned to the places they have fled.

As I said before, in this world, multilateral approaches are becoming less, giving space to bilateral decisions or even unilateral measures. The UN system is frequently failing because of this reason. Instead of having concrete global approaches based on common understanding around the importance of protecting vulnerable people, giving access to basic needs, safeguarding human lives, we experience a world of growing fears, walls, divisions and barriers. As we said in our report on migration published in July 2018 in New York, restrictive immigration policies are creating a new walled order, where barriers to basic services turn migration into a humanitarian crisis. And also, barriers are a gift for the smugglers.

After every agreement to externalize the borders, every new wall or barrier that is created a new route is opened, which usually will cost more and be much more dangerous for the people that need to move. After the EU agreement with Niger, the smugglers work became illegal which didn’t stop at all them: it only switched the trip to a different and more risky way through the Sahara Desert. The only result that came out of this agreement was to give much more clients to traffickers – it did not prevent migrants from arriving in Europe. The more the migrants are pushed into the grey areas of our societies, the more they become potential victims of abuse and trafficking.

Ladies and gentlemen let me conclude by sharing with you a thought that has been accompanying me over the past months.
In this period, we are experiencing a deeply worrying politicization and even criminalization of humanitarian aid. In Europe we arrived at the point that even saving lives in the Mediterranean Sea became a political act. I believe humanitarianism itself is at risk at this moment. How did this become possible? How did we arrive at this shocking situation?

As a volunteer who was elected to represent one of the largest humanitarian networks in the world, I want to reaffirm that with all the activities and actions we do, with all what we say, we are only taking a clear stand for humanity. We are not choosing the side of politics, we choose the side of the vulnerable. We are not for or against migration. We chose the side of the most vulnerable.

We stand up for the people who are left alone.

Our message is crystal clear: we want to save lives and protect the human dignity of people.