150th Anniversary of Red Cross Humanitarian Action

Mr. Erkki Liikanen, the President of the Finnish Red Cross

Mr. President of the Republic,

Ladies and gentlemen,

friends of Red Cross

On the eve of midsummer 151 years ago a young Swiss Henry Dunant went to Castiglione, Italy. The village was preparing for a battle. This was one of many conflicts that followed the unification of Italy. He stayed in the village during the battle and faced the reality of war when mutilated soldiers were brought in to Castiglione. Henry Dunant was shaken by what he saw and wrote the famous book Un Souvenir de Solferino. He proposed an aid organization to be created in peace time to alleviate the sufferings of soldiers at war. The rest is history.

A new organization was created to help the wounded at the battle field 150 years ago. The history of Red Cross movement began.

The history of the Finnish Red Cross started 14 years later. Finland was still a part of the Russian Empire. For that reason the Finnish movement was in the battle field officially a part of the Russian Red Cross.

Since then the Finnish Red Cross has worked to support human rights and humanitarian law, to provide swift and effective disaster relief and to take an active part to creating lasting solutions to difficult situations.

Today the most urgent needs are in Syria. More than 2 million Syrian refugees are hosted in the neighboring countries. And there are millions of internally displaced persons in the country. Women and children make up three-quarters of the refugee population. The vast majority of refugees are dependent on aid, arriving with little more than the clothes on their backs.
UNHCR announced in June of this year that it was seeking 12,000 places for relocation of Syrians in acute need. This would help meet the needs of highly vulnerable Syrians.

Since then Germany and Austria have committed places for humanitarian admission (5,000 and 500 respectively). A number of other countries have come forward with offers of resettlement places: Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland and Finland. These countries have pledged more than 1,650 resettlement places.

Germany's Humanitarian Assistance Program provides for up to 5,000 places for Syrian refugees. It is the biggest relocation program currently in Syria crisis. This is an additional quota.

Next year Finland will allocate 200 places of her quota of 750 for Syrian refugees and resettle an extra quota of 300 refugees.

Finnish Red Cross has supported and supports this act of solidarity. We know that there is an urgent need to relocate most vulnerable refugees with special needs. We need to help also the humanitarian situation in those neighboring countries which have received enormous numbers of refugees. For us in the Finnish Red Cross it is extremely important that Finland carries her own responsibility as a nation. We volunteers will take our responsibilities as citizens.

In 2011–2013, Finland has provided 12 million € in humanitarian assistance for the Syrian crisis. This assistance has been made available both to people in need of help within the country and to refugees fleeing to neighboring countries. Support has been channeled through UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO, ICRC and FinnChurchAid.

Close to 3 million € has been channeled as humanitarian aid through the Finnish Red Cross. The biggest effort has been the field hospital in the Azraq refugee camp. This is under construction in Jordan. The hospital is a joint project of four Red Cross National Societies. It is mainly funded by ECHO.

On behalf to the Finnish Red Cross I want to welcome you warmly to the event when we celebrate the 150 years of the Red Cross humanitarian Action.

We are particularly happy and honored that the President of the Republic and the Patron of the Finnish Red Cross Sauli Niinistö has accepted to participate in this anniversary and to say his opening remarks.
The International Committee was the first body created after Dunant’s initiative. The National Societies were founded later. Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross Mme Christine Beerli will tell us about the challenges of humanitarian action today.

The Finnish Red Cross has broad membership and active fund-raising. Thousands of volunteers participated in our largest annual campaign Hunger day just two weeks ago and tens of thousands of Finnish citizens made their contribution. This is important for us to make our part of financing the emergency projects. Still we need a lot of co-financing. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland has been our most important partner for decades. Mr. Pertti Torstila, the Secretary of State at the Ministry will speak here today about Finland’s humanitarian policy.

The Finnish Red Cross has had and has today very close contacts to the Afghan Red Crescent Society. Since 1973 we have cooperated in many projects and more than 100 Finnish delegates have worked in Afghanistan. I had also the pleasure to visit Afghanistan and witness the extraordinarily important work the Red Crescent Society is doing in difficult circumstances. We highly appreciate that you, Mme Fatima Gailani, the president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, have made a long trip to Finland to speak in our event.

A young Finnish Journalist brought Afghanistan close to the Finnish audience by his unforgettable reports in 2001. He was later given the first prestigious journalism award for this reporting. Mr. Kaius Niemi, the Senior Editor-in-chief of Helsingin Sanomat has promised to talk about disasters in the media.

Once more I want to welcome you to the 150th Anniversary of Red Cross humanitarian action.

I want to give the floor to the President of the Republic.