

**18<sup>th</sup> South East Asian Leaders meeting  
16<sup>th</sup> of October 2020, 8.00 CEST on TEAMS  
Speech, Francesco Rocca, President IFRC**

Esteemed Leaders of Southeast Asia National Societies  
Colleagues of the ICRC and IFRC,

It is a pleasure and great honour for me to be with you today, virtually, for the 18th annual Southeast Asian Leadership meeting. Last year when we met, I was sure that I would be able to join you in person for today's meeting. But unfortunately, COVID-19 still has a strong influence of our lives, and we need to be cautious and take our responsibility in contributing to putting an end to this global pandemic.

But meetings, even in these virtual settings, are important and add value. It allows us to keep the dialogue going and continue the exchange and cooperation until we can meet again. I am very happy to see so many participants – from 11 National Societies - present here today. We even have some new personalities amongst us and I would like to take this opportunity to greet the President of Lao Red Cross, Associate Prof. Dr Phouthone Muongpak, and the Secretary General of Thai Red Cross, Mr. Tej Bunnag.

I also much welcome the invitation you extended to your youth representatives – for the first time. I see this as a sign of your strong commitment to ensure that the youth voice is heard! Youth engagement is important to me, and I believe that involving youth is not only an investment in the future. It is an investment in today, as young people make up a large part of the population. Who is better placed than young people to understand and acknowledge their needs? I would like to warmly greet all youth members in this “virtual room” and encourage you to make your voice heard in this meeting, and beyond.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all gone through a challenging period. The Pandemic has added pressure to our societies and has caused immense additional suffering. It has reminded us how fragile we are, and that no one, nowhere, is immune to crises at large scale.

One and a half years into the pandemic we have reached a state of fatigue, where it appears society cannot take, nor afford, lockdowns and confinements anymore. This virus fatigue leads to some risky practices and policies, such as premature re-openings, and a frustrated population abandoning safety measures. This is why it is important that we take a pause and start thinking about how we want the “new normal” to be. What are the lessons learnt to bring to the post pandemic world?

I was happy to see that you will discuss “Reimagining Our Future: Building Back Better from COVID-19” later today. It is so important that we think about how we want our future to be and what the role of the Red Cross is in this setting.

Some months ago, I stumbled on a “global trends report for 2040”, which predicts that the world will face more intense global challenges ranging from disease to climate change, to the disruptions from new technologies, and financial crises. The report predicts that these challenges will repeatedly test the

resilience and adaptability of communities, states, and the international system. These challenges will interact, exacerbate, and complicate each other and result in further, more complex crises, some of which impossible to forecast. To have the greatest chance of success, the key word is **adaptation**.

In facing these challenges, I see an important role for the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Our IFRC Strategy 2030 – the “Strategy for Change” addresses transformation, agility, and adaptation. I encourage you all to take the discussions about “building back better” seriously and see this as an opportunity to reimagine our own role in this unpredictable future.

Recent data from over 100 countries, analysed by the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Collective Service shows that nearly 75% of respondents to the global study would agree to take a COVID-19 vaccine if available. Vaccine acceptance varies widely from one country to another, and this data reveals that vaccine accessibility and equity is a pressing issue. However, we are seeing a lower acceptance rate – only 58% - in low-income countries, where there is a direct correlation between trust in public authorities and responders and trust in vaccines. Moreover, in some countries where vaccines may be available, many people still do not know how to access them and need further support. As we advocate for vaccine equity, we need to continue listening and responding to community concerns and ensure that everyone has the information they need and the necessary means to access vaccines.

The COVID-19 vaccines are important for ending this pandemic. The IFRC is committed to “vaccines to all” and does its best to support National Societies to advocate with governments. I am particularly enthusiastic to hear the promising developments at Thai Red Cross on your own locally developed COVID-19 vaccine. I hope that this vaccine, when available, can assist to get on top of the pandemic not only in Thailand, but also to neighbouring countries through the Red Cross and Red Crescent network.

I recognize the huge challenges that you have been facing over the past year. In 2020 your region managed to successfully contain the disease, however, in recent months, the highly contagious Delta variant of COVID-19 has prompted record outbreaks, pushing fragile healthcare systems and displaying the need to urgently scale up the vaccine delivery in the region.

I appreciate that many of your National Societies are stretched for resources in scaling up your life saving activities and managing your own volunteer and staff health, something I can much relate to from my own experience as President also of the Italian Red Cross.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff have been at the forefront to provide humanitarian assistance, knowing the risks they face when helping their local communities in dire need. Without these tireless efforts, we would never be able to support the many people that need our help in these difficult times. I encourage you to look for opportunities to support volunteer safety, wellbeing, and mental health as fatigue sets in. Let me take this opportunity to particularly encourage the colleagues from Myanmar Red Cross for the challenging time you face with the crisis and pandemic concurrently and in keeping volunteers safe.

I would also like to share my heartfelt condolences to all the National Societies that have lost volunteers and staff, and family members, to this pandemic. I also wish a quick recovery to those that have been, or still are, sick with COVID-19.

What the future will bring is still in the stars, but we know, unfortunately, that needs are increasing and we – the Red Cross and Red Crescent – are needed more than ever. It is important that we continue to carry out our work and that we adapt to stay relevant when new needs arise, both in relation to the pandemic and in other areas that require our attention, such as the climate crisis.

The contemporary challenges that we are all facing must be approached in a holistic way as they are all interlinked. From 12-14 of October ICRC President Peter Maurer and I have called for a virtual Summit where we will address climate change, pandemics, and local action. I invite you and your National Societies to engage and share your experiences in this forum.

Our next occasion to meet will be at the General Assembly and the Council of Delegates, which has been postponed to 2022. The date is still to be decided, but as we know more, you will be informed. At the next General Assembly, we will hold the election of a new governance of the IFRC. In line with the Manila Call for Action, I would like to remind you about your strong commitment to women leadership and I ask you to take this into account when you present your candidates.

ENDING

I wish you all a successful 18th annual Southeast Asian Leadership meeting. My deep appreciation goes to the Thai Red Cross for organizing this virtual event and to all of you for participating and contributing to its outcomes.

And – let me end by quoting our founder Henri Dunant: Siamo Tutti Fratelli: we are all brothers (and sisters), and we are all united in one shared humanity! We have common priorities and concerns, and we are well placed to work together to strengthen our common humanity. It is up to us to make the difference!

Thank you!