



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**



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Herman Van Rompuy
President of the European Council
Celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Belgium Red Cross
"The European Union: of, for and by the people"

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Rarely did these famous words, by the anthropologist Margaret Mead, ever rung more true than in the case of the Red Cross.

Henri Dunant, citoyen de Genève, était un homme d'affaire de tout juste 31 ans lorsqu'il découvrit l'horreur des champs de bataille ensanglantés de Solférino. Son cri du cœur, son appel, résonna au-delà des frontières – il résonna en Belgique. Et il résonne encore aujourd'hui, de part le monde et dans notre pays, après un siècle et demi.

Met deze verjaardag vandaag, vieren we méér dan de 150 jaar sinds de stichting van het Rode Kruis, meer dan anderhalve eeuw van inzet om de medemens. We vieren de geboorte van de moderne humanitaire beginselen, 150 jaar van humanitair werk - in neutraliteit, onafhankelijkheid en onpartijdigheid.

Today we remember an idea. A simple statement: that even in wars, there are limits to what is tolerable. That we should never give up on humanity. We celebrate a quantum leap – so generous yet so sensible, so seemingly out of reach yet so necessary. We celebrate a work of peace, guided by ideals, but driven by pragmatism. The Red Cross always pleaded for the world as it should be, yet acted in the world as it is.

Fighting atrocity and indifference one wounded at a time. Each human being is unique. Every man or woman, boy or girl counts.

P R E S S

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The founding principle of the Red Cross – that civilians, sick and wounded combatants, and prisoners of war should be protected in times of war – has become the cornerstone of international humanitarian law.

And Belgium can be proud that it was there from the very start. Dunant's call was heard by our countrymen and women. We owe them our Belgian Red Cross, the oldest national society of the movement worldwide. Those brave first supporters, those patient advocates, who saw humanity as their duty, driven by compassion and love – what would they think today I wonder?

Seeing all the path travelled, all the work done, all the dedication, they would surely feel immense pride. Probably none of them would have dreamt at the time that the adventure would live strong for 150 years. Because the Red Cross was not designed to last. And for this very reason, their amazement at today's achievements might also include a certain bitterness – that the Red Cross should still be necessary even in the twenty-first century. We avoided world wars in the last decades, but war, killings, torture, genocide were not banned. Evil did not disappear.

Reeds na 50 jaar – in 1914 –, was ons nationale Rode Kruis al sterk verankerd. Ze genoot al de patronage en een persoonlijk engagement van het Koninklijk Huis – een steun, die tot vandaag aanhoudt.

La Croix Rouge avait cinquante ans, on était en quatorze. Déjà, son action était internationale, et ses volontaires avaient déjà régulièrement répondu présents sur les terrains de crises – de l'Alsace à la Constantinople.

Mais en ce début 1914, nul ne se doutait du drame qui s'apprêtait à engouffrer notre continent – et dont notre pays serait le plus sanglant champs de bataille. Des millions d'hommes, venus de partout dans le monde, souffraient ou mourraient sur nos si paisibles terres.

Our Belgian Red Cross was mobilised like never before. Hospitals everywhere – even in the Royal Palace! Today we should also pay homage to those who brought essential care and comfort to the wounded on our soil.

The pro-European movements of the first half of the twentieth century had a lot in common with the early supporters of the Red Cross. They too fought for an idea so big that it seemed utopian; so simple and yet so necessary. The plea for Europe, like the plea for humanitarian principles decades before, was a plea for peace. An appeal to the sense of personal duty in the face of human suffering. It was a movement of the people, by the people and for the people.

In a way, the European idea was meant to make the Red Cross redundant in our countries, by closing down forever their battlefields. The founders of Europe succeeded for the same reason that Henri Dunant succeeded. They too were guided by values, yet driven by pragmatism.

L'Union européenne et la Croix Rouge étaient faites pour s'entendre...

En tot op de dag vandaag, in crisisgebieden over de hele wereld, werken het Rode Kruis en de Europese Unie nauw samen.

We share principles, values and goals. Together, we promote and uphold fundamental humanitarian law.

One of the reasons why the Red Cross can play a unique role worldwide, and why it is such a precious interlocutor for the European Union, is because of its unique network. The power of the Red Cross is local. Its reach is unrivalled. Nearly in every country, "sister societies" are hard at work, everywhere they might be needed, and powered by the people.

The Red Cross volunteers know the world as it is, they know its generosity and they know its grimness. There are no places where the Red Cross doesn't go if it is needed – always impartial, always neutral, always independent.

Over the years, its work has evolved, just like the European Union's international humanitarian work. Still protection, but also prevention. It is true abroad and it is true at home. All the Red Cross "societies" are connected. They support each other. Each contributes its own expertise, wherever it is needed.

The Belgian Red Cross is no exception. It has its own missions abroad, and it supports the work of other Red Cross programmes through fundraising and expertise. But the Red Cross entered also into our daily lives, via numerous activities at the service of people.

Today in Belgium, the face of the Red Cross is its twenty-five thousand volunteers and close to two thousand full-time staff. Their presence is always reassuring, whether for 'first aid', blood donations, or reaching out to the most vulnerable and isolated. Against marginalisation, against isolation, against poverty, Red Cross volunteers never give up. They are people of all ages, of all streets of life, and at the service of all. Always professional, always understanding. They are there in the hard times... and there in the bright times – think of events like football matches, festivals or concerts, or the 21st July! Many give their time. They are not asking for money. For them, the Red Cross is a part of their search for meaning in life. All deserve our gratitude, our respect.

So let me wish every one of them a very happy year of celebration for this 150th anniversary, and thank the Red Cross of Belgium, on behalf of the European Union, for its amazing work!