The sounds of traditional Kenyan drummers and dancers filled the air as nearly 1,000 Red Cross and Red Crescent delegates from over 175 countries arrived for the opening ceremony of IFRC’s General Assembly at the United Nations Office in Nairobi.

The President and Prime Minister of Kenya also attended the meeting, which is being held in Africa for the first time in the Red Cross Red Crescent’s long history.

“It is a source of pride and honour to us that Kenya was selected as the host country when these very important events will be remembered,” said Kenyan President Mr. Mwai Kibaki in his speech, which referred to the 150-year commemoration of the battle of Solferino, the 90-year anniversary of IFRC and the 60-year anniversary of the Geneva conventions.

“It is my hope that these events will help to highlight the urgent steps that need to be taken to address [humanitarian] challenges,” he told the Assembly, adding: “I applaud the noble work you undertake for humanity.”

Representatives from National Societies read out the Fundamental Principles in Swahili, English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin and Russian. A huge globe was then lifted in the air by dancers with an exclamation “Our world. Your move.”

“I believe that today we have a more flexible, solvent Federation that is better equipped to address humanitarian needs of any kind, complexity or dimension,” said President of the IFRC, Juan Manuel Suarez del Toro.

“Every vulnerable person who receives a glimmer of hope thanks to our work is one reason more to persevere in our efforts,” he added.

The statutory meetings end on 25 November.
In his final speech to the General Assembly, President Juan Manuel Suarez Del Toro Rivero spoke of his "intense, stimulating and personally rewarding" eight years in charge of the world's largest humanitarian network. He told the Assembly that, when he was first encouraged to stand for the presidency, his goal was to modernize the IFRC and create a greater sense among National Societies of being the Federation, not just belonging to it.

The consultative process of the Federation of the Future grew out of this ambition, and the model and work method that resulted, he hoped, to "help us reach more people who are struggling in the face of adversity, enabling us to provide the necessary assistance".

He cited the Global Agenda as an essential tool for highlighting the need to enhance local, regional and international capacities and to raise awareness of a number of issues, and the Framework For Action as a positive step towards streamlining the network's efforts.

The renewed and more dynamic IFRC had welcomed several new member societies over the years, he said, but he recalls "special satisfaction" at the admission of Magen David Adom and the Palestine Red Crescent Society in 2006.

"I consider it a milestone in the history of our Federation and a demonstration to the entire world of the power of our Fundamental Principles to unite people in the cause of human dignity," the president said.

He paid tribute to the dedication of Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers across the world and reminded the Assembly that the support of young people is essential if the Movement is to achieve its ambitions.

"As a young man I approached the Red Cross determined to make the world a better place," he said. "With all the wonderful things I have learned over the past eight years, I am even more passionate – if that is possible – about the Red Cross Red Crescent than I was before assuming the presidency."

The secretary general of IFRC has praised National Societies for the work they have done in support of vulnerable people and outlined new ways in which the network can achieve even more in a challenging and changing world.

Secretary General Bekele Geleta, addressing his first General Assembly since taking over the role in July 2008, updated delegates on the secretariat’s achievements in disaster response and recovery, development and humanitarian diplomacy, and its progress on the Moving Forward Together process and the Global Programme for Africa.

In his address, Geleta called for the walls between disaster response and disaster preparedness to be torn down, noting the difference in support for appeals following a catastrophe and those launched to raise funds to prevent one taking place altogether. The Red Cross Red Crescent's work in disaster response should move seamlessly into recovery and development, he said.

"Disaster response is a sprint, but disaster recovery is a marathon," said Geleta. "We will not last the course without planning, foresight and the determination to do the job well."

He noted that the network's unique qualities come with great responsibility, particularly in the areas of accountability and standards.

"We are the Red Cross Red Crescent," he said. "Our standards are higher than those of other organizations, because those standards are rooted in our Fundamental Principles."

On the issue of National Society development, Geleta called for "a holistic approach of knowing and internalizing the business; good leadership and technical skills; building resources; developing and applying systems of accountability, and standards of certification for all."

He praised National Societies for their achievements and told them that the future success of the IFRC will be measured by their satisfaction with the secretariat’s support to them.
Moving forward in Africa together

A report tabled to the General Assembly by the Federation Secretariat maps out a vision for future Red Cross and Red Crescent work in Africa.

The report, presented by the under secretary general for development, Matthias Schmale, begins with an overview of the considerable successes of African National Societies and their Federation.

It notes, for example, that over the past two and a half years, southern African National Societies have together reached more than 15.5 million people through their HIV programmes.

However it warns that now is not a time for the Red Cross Red Crescent to rest on its collective laurels.

The report outlines then a ‘way forward.’ It notes that the efforts of many African National Societies to bridge the divide between humanitarian assistance and development need to continue and at a greater rate.

It argues also, that the Red Cross Red Crescent needs to strengthen its capacity to influence African policy makers to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are reflected in policies, plans and laws.

Above all, it renews the call for greater emphasis on effective capacity building and organizational development.

It notes specifically, that efforts must be made to attract Africa’s best and brightest to the Movement, ensuring strong leadership and governance.

It calls also for support to National Societies so that they can strengthen their own abilities to raise funds and develop stable systems.

Finally, it notes that the role of the Federation secretariat remains one of supporting National Societies.

Specifically, it notes that the recent restructure of the secretariat in Africa will see more resources focused towards the country level.

Swahili phrases

Msalaba Mwekundu - Red Cross
Karibu - Welcome
Sasa - Hi
Habari yako? - How are you?
Mzuri sana - Very well
Asante sana - Thank you very much
Sawa sawa - Okay, okay
Poa - Cool
Naku penda - I love you
Kwaheri - Bye
Saa ngapi? - What time is it?
Samahani - Excuse me
Ndio / La / Labda - Yes / No / Maybe
Unauza ngapi? - How much?
Nimepotea - I’m lost
Exhibition space highlights scope of Red Cross Red Crescent work

More than 20 National Societies such as the Burundi Red Cross, German Red Cross and Tunisian Red Crescent have taken advantage of the exhibition space located on the first level of the UNON complex to display the diversity and reach of their activities.

Volunteers and staff are available to explain everything from handwashing campaigns to volunteer activities to disaster response information.

Sayda Awad from the Sudanese Red Crescent said the exhibition space was a good opportunity to share how her National Society works in Sudan, pointing out photos of first aid and HIV/AIDS trainings.

Her colleague Taha Hussein added, “we selected each photo to reflect activities by our volunteers. In our country, we have more than 400,000 volunteers.”

Anchoring the exhibition space is the ‘Our world. Your move.’ display, showcasing some of the more than 460 activities of National Societies held in 2009 under the banner of this global campaign. As well, a photo exhibition with over 50 images, entitled ‘Saving lives, changing minds’ chronicles the 90-year history of the IFRC.

“This space demonstrates the move from operations to service delivery. This paradigm shift to advocacy, partnerships and behavioural change has provided us with visibility that helps us to better serve the most vulnerable,” said Andrews Frimpong, secretary general of Ghana Red Cross.

Visitors are also encouraged to sign the campaign’s “simple gestures make a difference” banners. After the statutory meetings in Nairobi, these banners will be donated to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum for display in Geneva, Switzerland.

Social media training

Directly across from the global campaign booth is an interactive space, with five computers linked to www.ourworld-yourmove.org. Users can make their move online, contribute a blog post, or comment on a story.

The global campaign website is available in eight languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Delegates interested in social media training are invited to drop by the booth each day after the plenary. An English-language trainer will discuss how to use social media to promote your National Society’s activities.