They are four of the biggest challenges confronting the world today. They are urgent. They are critical. They are linked, and only collaborative action can meet them.

BBC special correspondent Lyse Doucet was succinct on Monday as she summed up the global trends that loom large on the International Conference agenda. But the debate she introduced, and which developed in plenary yesterday, clearly underlined another factor. The trends – climate change, international migration, urban violence, and emergent and recurrent diseases – are not new and there is enormous ground to make up.

As one senior Movement figure conceded afterwards, “There is no time to lose. The truth is, too much time has been lost already.”

Nowhere more so than on climate change where, the Conference was reminded, humanitarian issues have been overshadowed by environmental and political ones. “I see a lot about polar bears in those television advertisements,” Lyse Doucet said. “Not so much about people.”

The primary object of the discussion was to advocate for more collaboration between states, the Movement and other stakeholders in tackling humanitarian consequences of all four global challenges. The conference document refers to this as “a highly ambitious undertaking” but one prompted by the need to respond immediately to “the fragility of our planet, its limitations and its vulnerabilities” and “the growing interdependence of phenomena”, something identified by the Council of Delegates in 2005.

“While examining each topic individually in different conferences would have allowed a more in-depth analysis, taking them together will help us to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a cluster of challenges facing humanity and set the stage for further strategic thinking,” the document continued.

The urgency of the debate lay in “identifying opportunities for complementary humanitarian action, as the planetary scale of each of these issues today exceeds the coping capacity of any one individual state or humanitarian organization”.

Or as one delegation put it yesterday, capturing the tone of the discussion, “interaction, coordination and sharing of responsibilities constitute the only way in which to address new humanitarian challenges. Global scale emergency situations demand global scale collective responses.”

The scale of the challenges being addressed was all too apparent. One National Society said the influx of migrants to their country was growing by ten percent each year, and another from a country overwhelmed by uprooted people said current response was “a drop in the ocean”. They needed money and human resources to meet their obligations effectively.

A startling revelation came from one of the Movement’s strongest donor societies, confronted with extreme weather events. “We have had to learn that at home we must prepare for disaster to a degree we could never have thought of. We found we must totally reform our disaster preparedness. A new scenario has presented itself.”
A day of public pledging

Humanitarian commitments for the period 2008 to 2011 rose to more than 60 yesterday as pledges came in from Movement components and States.

For the International Federation, President Juan Manuel Suárez del Toro signed pledges on the prevention of abuse of power, strengthening the young volunteer base and the organization of the 2009 World Red Cross and Red Crescent Youth meeting.

Other signatories included Princess Astrid of Belgium and Princess Margriet of the Netherlands who signed commitments on behalf of their National Societies. Princess Astrid and Dominique Lutula, president of the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of Congo pledged their societies would continue the dissemination of IHL in the central African country.

All pledges will be made public on the last day of the International Conference.
A woman of flair

South African Red Cross President Mandisa Kalako-Williams, who has been elected president of the 30th International Conference, has decades of Red Cross experience as a volunteer, communications officer, programme director and member of governance.

She first witnessed the Movement in action in the South African townships. “Back then, I thought that the Red Cross was for white people helping black people,” she said.

“But then, at age 34, I moved to Lesotho, where I found the Red Cross being run by black people, for black people and white people, and I realized that the Red Cross is for all. So I joined as a volunteer.”

She later became the National Society’s information officer, and stayed there for seven years before considering a move back to South Africa and into the corporate sector.

“The night before I was due to start my new job with a publications company, I suddenly thought, ‘you have been equipped with so many tools that can make any Red Cross in any country work, and here you want to throw that away and work in the commercial world!’

“The following morning I went to the South African Red Cross and I said, well, here I am. I would like to serve.”

After a few years working in programmes, culminating in a successful period as director of programmes, she moved into the public sector. But the lure of the Red Cross was too strong, and she soon became an active volunteer on her National Society’s Governing Board.

The different roles she has performed during her Red Cross career have helped to shape her work in governance.

“You get to the levels where you can help the organization to function effectively and prominently, so that it can be credible nationally and internationally - but especially with the people who are vulnerable,” she said.

She is now in her second term as elected president. It has been a challenging time, but also an extremely rewarding one.

“I will say that at a time when the National Society was going through difficult governance issues, the one thing that kept me going was how the volunteers and staff at branch level kept the humanitarian fight going,” she said. “Our volunteers embody the fundamental principle of humanity. That’s what’s very grand about the Red Cross.”

“The corporate world, which I know well, has marketing interests in everything they do. For them it is about how much the market share will increase by being seen to be working with the Red Cross. For us, our advocacy and communication must derive from the quality of our work. The services that we provide have to speak larger volumes than our posters.”

Ms Malako-Williams is relishing the challenge of chairing the conference, and has been heartened to see the number of women taking an active role in their National Societies - and at the event itself.

“Women are pushing the doors,” she said. “There are National Society women at this conference who are trailblazers in their own countries. In southern Africa, these women are saying, ‘we are not asking for a favour, we want to do the same work that men are doing and add a special flair’.

“This is what the Red Cross needs. We don’t have enough resources – but we do have great human beings. And the women in this organization have the potential to bring these resources together because of their natural affinity for creation.” ■
Delegates are kindly requested to empty their pigeon holes on a daily basis.

This bulletin is for information purposes only. It does not constitute an official record.

Exhibitions

(Level minus 1 of the conference centre)

Drop by the Japanese Red Cross’s exhibition and you’ll see a sample of their emergency set containing materials to cover basic needs. They distributed around 2,900 sets during the Nigata earthquake. Also on display are photos of their work, including home nursing and search and rescue operations at snow mountain resorts, as well as their 2007 review of activities in an attractive “Nurse Kitty” folder.

HIV prevention is the theme of the St Lucia Red Cross exhibition. It displays provocative posters showing men and women with sexual partners’ names written on their faces, under the slogan “Nobody has the truth written on their face. Protect yourself. Use a condom.”

There’s a wealth of information – as well as balloons – on display at the Bulgarian Red Cross stand. Among the fascinating pamphlets is a catalogue from the 16th International Exhibition for Disabled Children, which includes beautiful artwork by children aged five and up.

The Armenian Red Cross display focuses on its health, youth and volunteering work. The society works to prevent HIV, prevent and treat TB and promote child and maternal health. It’s also developing volunteers to alleviate the suffering of marginalized groups, such as orphans, disabled young people, lone and elderly refugees and children.

For an interesting look at brand repositioning, stop by the Australian Red Cross’s exhibition. Their display explains that they created a new brand in 2006 to convey their breadth of services in a “simple, recognisable and compelling manner”. They also have free copies of the pamphlet “Promoting Respect for International Humanitarian Law”, produced under the new brand guidelines.

Thirty years ago the Papua New Guinea Red Cross became a member of the Federation, and their exhibition shows how busy they’ve been since then. “People helping people” is their theme and their display includes posters dispelling myths about HIV as well as a collection of newspaper articles highlighting various parts of the Movement.

The International Federation’s Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support is displaying brochures showing some of the less obvious consequences of disasters and armed conflict. Fortunately, it also provides handy information on how the centre can help National Societies promote psychosocial well-being.

Follow Snow White and the seven dwarfs to the Seychelles Red Cross display. The cartoon characters explain the Fundamental Principles while the rest of the exhibition highlights the society’s disaster preparedness, dissemination and health and social care activities.

A pack of playing cards showing first aid techniques is just one of the interesting items on display at the Red Cross Society of China’s exhibition. Posters explain the work of the Hong Kong Red Cross, including blood donation and health checks, and Macau Red Cross, such as first aid services and disaster preparedness.

All photos: International Federation