Red Cross Society of China, three-year anniversary of Sichuan earthquake
Sichuan, China
5 May 2011

Address by Mr Tadateru Konoé, President
I am with you today as President of your International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and it is in this capacity that I will speak. Later, I hope you will permit me to say a few words from the perspective of your sister National Society, the Japanese Red Cross, which I also serve as President.

When I first came to the Sichuan disaster area in June 2008, in my role as Vice President of the IFRC together with Mr. Suarez del Toro, then IFRC President, Madame Peng Peiyun, then President and Madame Jiang Yiman, then Executive Vice-President of the Red Cross Society of China, I saw communities still reeling from the shattering force of the quake, and struggling to come to terms with what had happened. They were concerned about shelter, drinking water and food, and wondered how they would reconstruct their lives.

Red Cross Medical teams and relief workers from all over China were putting in long hours treating the wounded and distributing the most needed items to people living on streets, in tents and temporary shelters. The German Red Cross field hospital was treating patients in the middle of a wide avenue in the city of Dujiangyan. Three IFRC water and sanitation Emergency Response Units from the Austrian, British and Spanish Red Cross societies – deployed in China for the first time - were setting up their equipment to provide clean drinking water and sanitation for thousands of villagers. And thousands of IFRC tents were still pouring into Chengdu airport and being transported to remote communities. Although the amount may be small compared to the huge contribution from the Chinese people living abroad, contribution of more than 150 million US dollars was received from sister societies and others via IFRC and it is my pleasure to know that it is used in a very effective manner.

Throughout, volunteers and staff from Red Cross Society of China branches were calmly and efficiently planning emergency shelter, medical support and care for the ill and wounded, particularly children and the elderly.
Even at that early stage of the operation, one could not fail to be impressed with the coordinated and well-structured nature of the Red Cross Society of China response.

I know that many of you in the Red Cross Society of China branches were working and in some cases living in tents, just like the earthquake survivors you were supporting. Among them there were some known faces whom I had met earlier at different branches. But that hardship did not stop you dedicating yourselves wholeheartedly to helping those in need, and at the same time beginning the arduous work of building back better. And building back better is what you have achieved.

Dear friends,

Thanks to the generosity of donors in China and internationally, we now see housing that is much better than before, schools and hospitals that are safer and more convenient, and villages with clean and safe drinking water thanks to Red Cross Red Crescent support.

We have rebuilt public buildings and village homes with the financial assistance of National Societies of Canada, Japan, USA and others. In addition countless private businesses will soon be set up with training and micro loans provided by the Red Cross Society of China and its partners. All these are helping to restore prosperity and confidence to the region and its hard-working and resourceful people.

As well as being significant in helping to reshape the villages and farms of Sichuan, this kind of livelihoods support is also important in that it forms a new activity in which the Red Cross Society of China has not previously had extensive experience.

This is just one example of the way in which the earthquake has brought new ways of doing things and new experiences into our field of vision.
But there are many other examples. The Emergency Response Units, which were deployed to Sichuan, have now formed the basis for China’s own Emergency Response Teams, based in several of the country’s most disaster-prone provinces.

When an earthquake struck Yushu in Qinghai province in April last year, highly-trained teams from Hunan and Yunnan provincial Red Crosses rushed to the scene. Within a short space of time, they were able to provide clean drinking water and sanitation facilities for thousands of people whose homes had been destroyed or damaged in the disaster.

I understand that the Red Cross Society of China is now working to establish a total of six Emergency Response Teams that can be mobilized in the event of a disaster, and this will increase your already impressive capacities in this area.

Dear friends, / Qīn ai de péng you men / Dàjiā

You are also doing extensive community-based disaster preparedness and risk reduction work, supported by your IFRC and sister National Societies, and equipping warehouses with pre-positioned disaster relief supplies in areas at risk.

The Red Cross Society of China, with the support of the IFRC, has also responded to the disaster by setting up a broad programme of Community-based Health and First Aid Training. This will not only give people the skills they need in an emergency, but also gives them confidence. Thanks to their Red Cross training, they know that they can cope.

Dear friends,

Many National Societies, having responded to disaster and helped the people affected, have used their new skills and greater capacities to do more, do better and reach further, domestically and internationally.
The Red Cross Society of China is already doing this, and the IFRC is grateful for your support in our operations worldwide. The skill and professionalism of your staff and volunteers are admired and appreciated by the whole network. Your contribution to international operations in Haiti, Pakistan and New Zealand was significant, and I want to offer my own personal thanks for allowing an experienced senior staff member to join the high level IFRC assessment team sent to Japan following the recent earthquake and tsunami and nuclear power plant accident.

We in the IFRC hope to be able to continue to work with you as you develop this international role to its full potential in the future. We have learned so much from you in these three years, and it is my hope that our partnership will grow even stronger in the Spirit of Togetherness.

I know that, at the very outset of the Sichuan emergency, your international partners arrived with procedures and methodologies that may have worked well in other countries, but did not always suit the Chinese context. I regret that, as a result, there were some wrong turnings and delays along the road we travelled together. But when I look at our destination – these strong recovering communities, this transformation – I know that what we achieved together is of over-riding significance.

Dear friends / Qīn ai de péng you men / Dàjiān,

Speaking now as the President of the Japanese Red Cross Society, I wish to thank you for being such wise and accomplished partners. We were honoured to be able to work alongside you in this operation, and I am proud of what we have achieved together.

In 2008, when the huge earthquake struck Sichuan, it was just so natural for Japanese people to reach out to the affected population in China, and want to support our good neighbours who are also living in an earthquake-prone environment. After three years, it
seems it is our turn to be encouraged very much by the people in China, who may feel the same as we felt three years ago.

As the host recipient of such encouragement, the Japanese Red Cross is now learning from this new experience. We are particularly impressed with the voluntary contributions for the recent disaster in Japan made by the Chinese people at schools and hospitals constructed for the Sichuan earthquake reconstruction programme. We are extremely grateful for the huge solidarity shown by the people of China and the Red Cross Society of China and other National Societies at this difficult time in Japan.

Let us use these experiences, this shared learning and these new capacities to move forward to a new level. This is what we will have to do here in China, in Japan and in every country. And I hope that we will do so in a Spirit of Togetherness to build a safer and more humane world.

Thank you very much.