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ICRC

The President

Speech given by Mirjana Spoljaric

President of the International Committee of the Red Cross

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Dear graduates,

Congratulations to each and every one of you. You have thrived in a challenging and demanding learning environment.

It is a great pleasure for me to speak to you on this important day, and I thank the President of EPFL for the invitation.

Martin Vetterli's first message to you was on compassion.

Compassion echoes with **humanity**, the first Fundamental Principle of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Humanity in its ethical sense is described as compassion for one another; to prevent suffering, to protect life and dignity, to ensure respect for every human being.

160 years ago, the International Committee of the Red Cross was created in Geneva to bring humanity to places where there is armed conflict. Today, our delegates are present in numerous crisis situations around the world.

I know that this is difficult to imagine, but **war is not a lawless space**. My colleagues always find signs of humanity in even the most difficult situations:

- when a wounded combatant receives medical care from the enemy side;
- when hospitals and homes are not attacked;
- when civilians are granted safe passage.

In 1949, having experienced the immense suffering and destruction of two world wars, States came together to adopt the Geneva Conventions.

The Geneva Conventions are part of international humanitarian law – that the ICRC is mandated to safeguard.

They were engineered as a powerful system – agreed upon by all States - to guide militaries to make human choices in an armed conflict.

Even if the law is broken, its mere existence serves as a safeguard for humanity amidst chaos.

It is our collective **trust in the primacy of the law** that preserves a pathway to peace when the reality is cruel and complicated.

This trust is possible because humanity unites peoples; because humanity operates across borders, religions and ideologies; because kindness and compassion for the other exist in all civilisations.

In that same logic, international humanitarian law aims at reducing the cost of war. When respected, it brings opportunities to build trust among warring parties.

Now, many of you would probably contradict. You may say, and rightly so, that in the face of today's compound challenges, brought by climate change, inequalities, energy, water and food shortages, peace has become an elusive concept.

I also have to admit that the current geopolitical mindset makes conversations about peace sound innovative, not to say futuristic.

So, what I want to stress today is our shared responsibility to ensure **that war does not become the norm.**

We have to protect our core values – humanity and compassion – and this includes protecting the planet that we live on.

Dear graduates,

You are stepping into a new chapter of your life well equipped with a unique blend of technical knowledge, analytical and problem-solving skills.

In this new chapter you will start defining your purpose.

You do not need a trained diplomat to tell you what you already know: that the world is difficult to unpack.

And precisely – this is why you will find your purpose.

A year ago, I stepped into my role as president of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

I lead a humanitarian organization with more than 20'000 staff in over 100 countries.
Some of these staff, like you, are graduates of EPFL.

My colleagues work across the frontlines in places ravaged by war, helping those that are trapped in despair.

I have witnessed this first hand, in Mali, Syria, and Ukraine.

The ICRC is a neutral and independent organisation.

In an increasingly polarized world, non-partisan voices are not always welcomed.
When pressured to take side, the ICRC strives to make space for impartial humanitarian assistance. When the world takes sides, we side with humanity.

For us, neutrality and independence aren't a posture. Our ability to speak to all parties to a conflict has shown, time and time again, that we can secure long-term access to those in need and influence the behaviours of those who hold weapons and power.

In the same sense, **purpose is not a fixed destination**. Purpose is a compass.
Your purpose will evolve and change with time and experience throughout your life.

It is a journey that will bring you to complex situations: where problems are seemingly inextricable, where solutions are difficult to find.

But let me assure you this is a journey worth undertaking.

Because every time you will struggle with complexities, it will lead you to discover where you will make your greatest contribution.

Dear graduates,

In your future, you will have an impact on how people communicate, and on how societies function.

Many of you will be designing new technologies and shaping their use.

For people living in poverty or conflict, the challenges and promises of new technologies will always be felt more acutely.

Cyber operations can disrupt and destroy remotely.

But there is no question that international humanitarian and human rights law, and the protections it affords to civilians and civilian infrastructure, also apply to the design and use of new technologies.

This week, the UN Secretary General and I joined voices to call on political leaders to set clear international red lines to retain human control over the use of force. Leaving life-and-death decisions to machine calculation is a moral line that we cannot cross.

Moreover, unreliable or manipulated information can compromise the ability of people to understand where danger comes from and where to find help.

And finally, surveillance, cyberattacks, and disinformation against humanitarian organisations undermine trust, put humanitarian workers at increased risk, and impede the delivery of life-saving assistance.

Speaking from the perspective of those who work in conflict-affected settings and humanitarian crises, we need each and everyone of you. **We need your ethical compass to leverage new technologies for the good.**

For you – scientists and engineers – there is a clear way to guide a professional and responsible approach to technology and digitalization. That is an approach:

- that protects the rights, dignity, and safety of people;
- that always keeps human agency and discernment on top;
- and aims to preserve the diversity of our natural environment.

Our humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence – resonate with the **do-no-harm oath that scientists take.**

Humanitarian principles are not only a compass. They compel us to act and make a positive impact on the world – to relieve human suffering, to improve people’s well-being, and to strengthen societies.

As you leave this institution, go forth with determination and confidence.

Embrace the challenges, do your utmost to make a positive impact, take satisfaction in your achievements.

And most importantly: **have the courage to always put humanity at the center of whatever you do.**

Because dreams without a purpose are just dreams.

I wish you all the best.