

Speech by the Hon Wong Yan Lung, SC, JP
Secretary for Justice
at the 8th Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Moot
on Saturday, 6 March 2010

Sir T.L. Yang, Mr Anton Camen, Mr Justice Chan, judges and participants, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to join you again this afternoon. The Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Moot is in its 8th year this year. I am privileged to have attended the Prize Presentation Ceremony in both 2006 and 2007. It is very encouraging for me to be here today to see that you have grown from strength to strength, in terms of the scale of the event and the standard of the participants. I did not attend this morning's function but I was told that the standard was very high. Congratulations to you all.

2. This year we have 20 teams from different universities in the Asia Pacific Region which makes this truly a regional event in the university mooting calendar. May I congratulate the organiser and judges for your huge efforts to make this event a great success.

3. I see that most of you are from the region. I hope apart from the court rooms here and the universities, you will find time to savour the many delights our city offers.

4. International humanitarian law is founded on a deep respect for human value and dignity and a firm aversion against abuses, oppression and injustice particularly during strife and conflicts. Last year we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions when the essence and spirit of International Humanitarian Law have been reaffirmed. It also offered an excellent opportunity for us to reflect on the new challenges and changes we have to make to the changing environment.

5. You may recall the controversy, just two days ago, where a US congressional panel voted to label as "genocide" the massacre of Armenians by Turkish forces during World War One, prompting Turkey to recall its ambassador from Washington.

6. And also according to Dr Jakob Kellenberger, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 911 and its aftermath have set a new test for International Humanitarian Law. The polarisation of international relations and the humanitarian consequences of the “global war on terror” presented huge challenges. The proliferation and fragmentation of non-state armed groups, some of which rejected the premises of International Humanitarian Law, also posed new threats.

7. Certain areas of humanitarian law, such as those relating to the conduct of hostilities, conditions of detention, internal displacement of civilian populations and even protection of the environment, require clarification and further development. It is therefore very good to hear that the ICRC has undertaken a comprehensive research to study and address the humanitarian and legal challenges with a view to proposing the way forward.

8. After all, compliance with the International Humanitarian Law regime remains the key challenge. Respect for and understanding of it by the international community is vital for the concerted efforts to enhance compliance.

9. Against that background, the Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Moot provides you, law students in the region, with the much needed exposure and opportunity to explore issues of justice and fairness on the international and humanitarian level, and to exchange views from different perspectives.

10. I know you have a very intensive programme these two days, but I am sure the experience you have is both enlightening and enabling. No matter where you are in terms of academic pursuit, engaging competitors (particularly those who are better than you are) opens up precious opportunities to learn from one another and to set new standards for yourselves.

11. Through the different rounds, you have many opportunities to stretch your ability to digest voluminous complex materials before you, to marshal your thoughts, to present your arguments in a lucid and convincing manner, and to provide answers to questions presented by the judges. And, I hope, you have also gained many friends.

12. President Obama said at the acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize that we do not have to live in an idealised world to reach for those ideals that will make it a better place...but love, faith in human progress, and what he called “that spark of the divine that stirs within each of our souls” must always be the North Star that guide us on our journey.

13. Certainly, it was that love, faith and humanitarian ideals that brought Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross and the driving force behind the Geneva Conventions, the first Nobel Prize for Peace.

14. As aspiring lawyers, judges and future leaders, I sincerely hope that you will be the torch bearers of that divine spark to contribute to the protection and promotion of humanitarian values and to help create a culture of respect, understanding and lasting peace in your respective community.

15. Thank you very much.