

The General Assembly decided in December 1991 to strengthen and improve the United Nations' response to emergency humanitarian needs as well as the support of rehabilitation and recovery actions in the context of more long-term human development (Resolution 46/182).

Experience from different emergency operations has made clear that delay due to lack of resources and insufficiency in co-ordination can be fatal. The crisis in the Persian Gulf exposed by the media to the world community showed children's vulnerability when caught by the atrocities of war. Other complex and acute emergency situations caused by conflict, population displacement and natural disasters; for example drought in the Horn of Africa, requires a strengthening of the UN system to cope with these complicated situations. The need for a system of early warning and preparedness has emerged over the years. Knowledge about the process of catastrophes has grown and we know for example, that after the first week most of the casualties can be counted. In almost all emergencies children are the most vulnerable because their bodies and souls are still under development.

Lately, the awareness of children's psychological needs after traumatic experience has grown. Whether the catastrophe is man-made, natural or a combination of both, children need special support.

When the Special High-Level Council of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) held its inaugural session in October 1991, the Council considered that "reducing vulnerability to natural disasters is a major goal requiring concerted and co-ordinated efforts of government, UN-system organizations, the world's scientific and technical community, volunteer organizations, schools and educational institutions, the private sector, the media and individuals at risk. Vulnerability assessment and early-warning of potential disasters and effective communication to the public are essential.

Developing countries and highly-vulnerable groups, especially children, should be given the greatest priority in disaster-mitigation activities, including actions to address the psychological effects of disasters. Among the means for accomplishing this goal are locating and constructing of housing, infrastructure, schools and hospitals to avoid and resist hazard, educating students for self-protection, and using the media to reach the vulnerable population.

The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, has doubled its emergency actions in 1991. UNICEF has responded to emergency situations in about 40 countries. Natural disasters, health-related emergencies and armed conflicts formed the background for these contributions. The unprecedented demands are estimated to have taken some \$US 140 million of UNICEF's resources. In undertaking these emergency interventions, UNICEF often refers to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of the World Summit for Children, and especially to Commitment no. 20:8, as adopted by the world leaders participating at this World Summit:

"We will work carefully to protect children from the scourge of war and to take measures to prevent further armed conflicts, in order to give children everywhere a peaceful and secure future. We will promote the values of peace, understanding and dialogue in the education of children. The essential needs of children and families must be protected even in times of war and in violence-ridden areas. We ask that periods of tranquility and special relief corridors be observed for the benefit of children, where war and violence are still taking place."

UNICEF's 1992 Executive Board will discuss the circumstances under which UNICEF should intervene as a mediator for children in armed conflicts.

It is now widely recognized that events in different stages of childhood may effect the individual during its whole adult life. It is also recognized that we have possibilities of alleviating these later sufferings if we take proper care of children after catastrophes, disasters and armed conflicts. Our obligation for children after extreme life-experiences is clearly stated in article 39 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child promising them physical rehabilitation, psychological recovery and social reintegration in an environment which fosters health, dignity and self-respect. This paragraph should be a guideline for all our efforts to help children in extreme life-situations.

Amartya Sen, Professor in economy of development at Harvard University, is one of the scientists who has studied different natural disaster processes connected to famine. He states that starvation does not come without warning, that it can be identified. He also tells us about how decisive the democratic society is for citizens to be able to bear influence on the upcoming crises. A free press increases the people's ability to disseminate information concerning crucial circumstances and thereby to act in favour of positive change.

Amartya Sen's analysis will contribute to our understanding of the context in which some disasters emerge and how they most severely affect people without political power.

As members of the international community, we must continue to improve our strategies to protect children from disasters and to support them when they suffer from traumatic experiences.

(See also recommendations on page 5)

Co-operating to Protect Children

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Special High-Level Council for IDNDR