

National Level Response

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For over five years I have had the privilege of heading the Disaster Unit of the ODA, the aid wing of the Foreign Office. In that capacity I have met with many in this room who have been in search of Government funds for humanitarian aid for emergencies or for prevention of those emergencies or future ones. To them I apologise for restating the fairly obvious – at least I am restating much of what my professional colleagues have said.

In line with the objectives of this Workshop I wish now to raise awareness of what HM Government is doing in the field of response to natural disasters of sudden onset. I must admit it is something of a relief to be able to address this subject without the more complicating factors which affect humanitarian aid in manmade situations, especially where civil strife gets inevitably tangled up with peacekeeping and politics. My colleague Jack Jones spends virtually all his time currently on humanitarian aid in the former Yugoslavia but will follow me to cover ODA's Disaster Relief Initiative for which he is also responsible along with disaster preparedness efforts.

So what is the disaster response role of ODA? We seek to make rapid, correct and cost effective decisions, which have the capability of actually saving lives, but on very limited information and against inevitably a political background. Given all that Claude de Ville just said, not an easy task. It is a role which calls on 19 years of experience in providing relief by the Disaster Unit, now the largest part of the Emergency Aid Department. The Department administered exactly £100 million in non-food humanitarian aid in 1991/92. In 1992/93 (which ended 30 March) that figure rose to nearly £119 million. Not a signal of success, I suggest, but a sad reflection of the growing demand.

The disaster response business has changed radically in the last three or four years. The disasters we face now are certainly more complex than ever before. But our systems are such that we plug very quickly into what is going on around the world. We are at the forefront of aid to the former Yugoslavia, we are the third largest bilateral donor to Somalia and we have done more than our bit, and will continue to do so, in Iraq. My examples are all man-made disasters because they take the bulk of our manpower and financial resources and of Press interest. However, by far the majority of our 70 or more responses per annum are for relief to sudden onset natural disasters. Basically we are a funding agency, seeking at all times to be well informed on what are the often rapidly changing circumstances of a particular disaster and how the needs of the victims can best be addressed. We recall also that we are very much part of the international community which is responding from many different sources. Therefore we liaise very closely with our embassies and NGOs and especially with the

United Nations' DHA – Geneva (the old UNDRO) which, with close links itself to the Geneva-based humanitarian agencies, attempts to inform and coordinate worldwide. We seek rapid correct and cost effective decisions on very limited information and against a political background. No wonder even crude assessments are so important.

Our resource base is essentially the expertise available in the UK in both public and private sectors. That said the most effective response, particularly to a sudden onset disaster, is often making funds available for immediate purchase of medicines and materials in the country concerned. Such a decision need take only hours.

Jack Jones will describe our DRI which since August 1991 has made available to those of us in the Disaster Unit who take decisions in the Minister's name on HMG's response to a more comprehensive operational response capacity. Fundamentally, however, as before DRI arrived, whenever we respond with personnel and supplies we do so to meet assessed needs in the sure knowledge, thanks to existing coordination systems, that we are not duplicating the efforts of others. So this may not yet be working perfectly – but we always need to know that the particular medical skills we send are actually required and that there are situations at the receiving end where local entities know our people are coming out and are ready to plug them into local systems, with support staff and interpretation facilities where necessary.

Speaking at a Ditchley Foundation conference in February my Minister referred to the myths of disasters. Many of us here are well aware of this way of looking at some of our problems (Tony Redmond used them this morning) but I think it worthwhile my repeating those posed by Lady Chalker relating to our work. First, the over-simplifications of media presentations. Separating Press fiction from disaster fact is just one of the extra tasks the Disaster Unit faces in considering the Government's responses. Of course, the media plays a major role in informing the public as disasters occur, but the Minister felt they could do more to inform people about the effectiveness of disaster relief, and the work that goes on to prepare for and prevent future disasters. Too many in the media are content just with the fleeting image of immediate suffering, and ignore the existence of evaluation and developmental situations.

Second, the myth that developing countries cannot help themselves in disaster response. We should not underestimate their real and growing capacity. This is particularly the case with natural disasters where most emergency relief in the early critical phases, for instance the rescue of trapped people, is inevitably provided by local people at the site of the disaster. Our humanitarian aid is only some 7% of the UK aid programme, the rest

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is long term development assistance to promote sustainable development and reduce poverty. This long term aid can also play a major role in avoiding disasters. It can, for instance, improve safety standards and training; and fund projects incorporating disaster mitigation measures. More widely the economic and social development it supports offers the best hope of improving countries' own capacities to prevent disasters and, where necessary, cope with their after-effects.

Third, the myth that anything we send is bound to be useful. What is absolutely essential in all circumstances is that the donor community assesses and addresses the *actual* needs of the victims. Needs which will change day by day, even hour by hour.

There is no single formula for disaster relief. Every disaster must be individually assessed and each requires its own individual, local and international response. Not every disaster requires the despatch of high-tech equipment and highly trained personnel, although this might be seen as the easy way to respond to calls of "something must be done". Sometimes it *will* be the correct approach. What we offer must fit in with the actual needs on the ground. Public support for humanitarian aid greatly influences the mobilisation of help. But we all operate within an international and professional context. What help is given must be based on an informed and professional assessment on the ground. And as a postscript to the Minister's words I know that that professional assessment is exactly what some people here today have provided for us in the past and no doubt will again.

To round off my part of this joint ODA presentation can I pick up on the second of those myths, namely the lack

of overseas capacity. The ODA is all about institution building overseas and that applies to the Disaster Unit as much as country programmes of development aid. We do seek to fund disaster preparedness and mitigation projects and institutions. Certainly, in the '70s and still in the '80s a strong option for response to a sudden onset natural disaster was to support the sending of UK personnel. I'm not at all sure that it is a first option in the '90s, although I readily concede that a variety of medical skills are more likely to be needed than, say, basic search and rescue skills. Despite major financial difficulties many developing countries have put in place some civil protection machinery – clumsy, less than wholly efficient, underfunded and understaffed. Even so, they exist and we who wish to help have to recognise this. We have to work with them.

May I put it to you who represent those in the UK who most want to help their fellow men, women and children that the most appropriate means may be to get involved in disaster preparedness and mitigation measures. Go out and encourage developing country authorities to ask the UK government (and other donors) to help financially, involve yourself in these projects; and then if and when the worst happens and a natural disaster occurs which cannot be contained by local resources you will be first in line to be called forward to help in direct response terms. You will have the knowledge which makes the NGOs so valuable in response terms, knowledge of the people, their customs and culture and the likely deficiencies. We in the Disaster Unit have the funds for this type of response (where it meets the assessed need, of course) – we also have funds for disaster preparedness projects and not enough projects currently to spend them on.