

Foreword

This Special Issue of DHA News attempts, for the first time, to provide an overall description of the natural as well as man-made disasters which occurred during the past year, in order to provide readers with a global overview of their occurrence and consequences.

It may not have been possible to cover all significant events or to provide fully up-to-date statistical data, since these take time to collect with precision.

We have tried, however, to focus on the essence of humanitarian action, that is the reduction of human suffering. This is, and will remain, the paramount objective of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

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Complex Emergencies

Approximately 2.6 million people in the states of the former Yugoslavia, hundreds of thousands of Kurds in the north of Iraq, more than 2 million people in southern Sudan and hundreds of thousands in the RENAMO-held areas of Mozambique, all share a common fate. Their lives have been fundamentally disrupted and in most instances immediately threatened by the perverse interaction of politics and poverty. They are victims of what are now called "complex emergencies".

Complex emergencies take a variety of forms. They can be the result of inter-state or internal conflicts which force people to seek survival and sustenance across borders or within safer areas in their own countries.

Throughout history and all over the world, people have been uprooted by persecution, war or natural disaster. Many of the scourges afflicting mankind today are as old as the world itself but, in conjunction with economic and social tensions and fresh outbreaks of ethnic or intercommunal conflict, their effects are unprecedented. In the face of these "disasters", man has never at the same time been so strong and so vulnerable. At a time when he has never exercised so much power over his planet and his destiny, he has never been so close to self-destruction and the destruction of his environment.

The escalation of violence is a characteristic of our times. There have been more than 150 regional armed conflicts since the end of the Second World War, causing more than 20 million victims. It is estimated today that one quarter of the third world's debt is due to arms purchases. In 1990, it was estimated that there had not been more than 26 days of total peace in the world since 1945. Hardest hit by contemporary armed conflicts is the civilian population. During the First World War, 5% of all victims were civilians, where as nowadays their number is very often over 75%.

At all times the violence of armed conflicts has been maintained through the availability of weapons, their apparently limitless sophistication and their profusion, even in countries where the minimum needed to survive does not exist. The conversion of the arms industry for peaceful purposes, through the establishment of conventions strengthening the implementation of the humanitarian law, must, now at the end of 1992 - during which there has not been a single day of peace anywhere in the world, be given serious consideration if we are to reserve the "suicidal tendency" apparent in the world day.

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They can be the result of political decisions in which certain segments of a population are deprived of their livelihoods, and have scant means to survive. More and more, the global community is witnessing the emergence of complex emergencies resulting from the breakdown of traditional state structures and the upsurge of ethnicity and micro-nationalism.

Whatever the cause, the fact is that over the past two years there has been an almost 35% increase in the number of complex emergencies around the world. Yet, it is not the percentage increase that is most alarming. Rather it is the enormous number of innocent human lives caught up in these politically-driven emergencies that is most

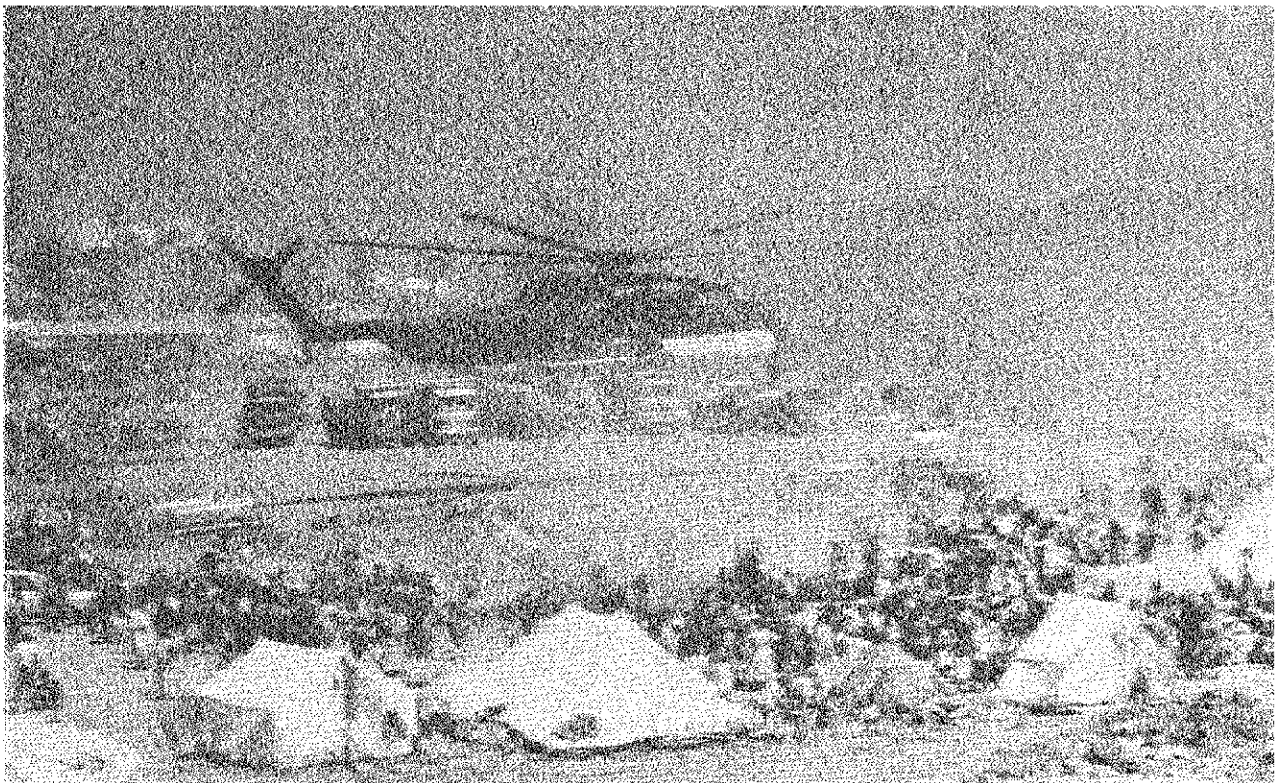
revealing. In Africa alone - from Liberia to the Horn of Africa to Angola and Mozambique - tens of millions of people are in urgent need of assistance. They have been trapped between conflicting factions; they have been thrown out of their traditional homelands; they have had to flee for their very survival.

More than ever before, the time and energy of institutions involved with emergency assistance and humanitarian relief are being devoted to providing urgently needed aid to the innocent victims of complex emergencies. This is certainly the case for the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), created in December 1991 by the United Nations General Assembly (GA Resolution 46/182).

(DHA-UNDRO NEWS - July/Aug. 1992). ■

*Iraqi refugee, Cukurca camp,
Hakkari Province, Turkey.*

UNHCR/A. Hollmann Photo



Iraqi refugees in Isikveren camp, Sirnak province, Turkey.

UNHCR/A. Hollmann Photo