



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

A global humanitarian organization

The **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies** is the world's largest humanitarian organization, providing assistance without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. The Federation's mission is *to improve the situation of the most vulnerable people*.

Founded in 1919, the International Federation comprises 175 member Red Cross and Red Crescent societies – with an additional number in formation – a Secretariat in Geneva and delegations strategically located to support activities around the world. The Red Crescent is used in place of the Red Cross in many Islamic countries.

The Federation coordinates and directs international assistance to victims of natural and technological disasters, to refugees and in health emergencies. It combines its relief activities with development work to strengthen the capacities of National Societies and, through them, the capacity of individual people. The Federation acts as the official representative of its member societies in the international field. It promotes cooperation between National Societies, and works to strengthen their capacity to carry out effective disaster preparedness, health and social programmes.

National Red Cross and Red Crescent societies embody the work and principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. National Societies act as auxiliaries to the public authorities of their own countries in the humanitarian field and provide a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programmes. During wartime, National Societies assist the affected civilian population and support the army medical services where appropriate.

The unique network of National Societies – which cover almost every country in the world – is the Federation's principal strength. Cooperation between National Societies gives the Federation greater potential to develop capacities and assist those most in need. At a local level, the network enables the Federation to reach individual communities. Together, the National Societies comprise 105 million volunteers and 300,000 employees, who provide assistance to some 233 million beneficiaries each year.

The **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. It also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Together, all the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are guided by the same seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. In the same manner, all Red Cross and Red Crescent activities have one central purpose: to help those who suffer without discrimination and thus contribute to peace in the world.

Rampant wildfires raged out of control across Indonesia following El Niño-driven droughts during 1997 and 1998 – the worst there in half a century. Smog affected the health of 70 million people. Rice yields plummeted, provoking widespread hunger and poverty. Environmental disaster and economic crisis conspired to plunge the nation into political and social chaos. But we need solutions more comprehensive than buckets of water to deal with the potential natural – and humanitarian – catastrophes facing our planet. Photo: Dermot Tatlow/PANOS, Indonesia 1998.

World Disasters Report **1999**

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Introduction

Environmental, political and economic change combine to put millions at risk

This century, two world wars and countless civil conflicts have framed the humanitarian agenda. But underlying these headlines has been the less-publicized work of responding to natural disasters.

As this decade closes, stark reminders highlight the need for a longer-term view of the humanitarian endeavour. Hurricane Mitch wrought fearful damage across Central American states in just 48 hours. Flooding in China affected the lives and livelihoods of some 180 million people. Earthquakes in Afghanistan exposed the plight of a people cut off from the outside world by vast mountains and intractable conflict.

Evidence suggests that mankind's exploitation of the environment, benign or otherwise, is significantly changing the way our biosphere works. Global warming is raising sea levels and may be responsible for harsher and more frequent El Niño/La Niña phenomena. Gradual changes in world climate will manifest themselves in extreme weather events. More hurricanes, more droughts, more floods. And the way we are changing the natural environment renders these hazards more destructive and those people caught in their path more exposed. Deforestation – to maximize farmland or logging profits – bared hillsides from Nicaragua to the Yangtze basin to the full destructive force of last year's torrential rains. Spreading urban environments promise great opportunities for human advancement. But without robust infrastructure, housing and land-use regulations, cities will only serve to concentrate the lethal impacts of floods, landslides and epidemics.

This year's *World Disasters Report* explores the ways environmental change and human short-sightedness have combined to trigger disaster. Earthquakes and hurricanes have sparked instant media interest and quick humanitarian reactions. But more worrying is the chronic and rapidly increasing vulnerability of poorer countries to extreme and recurrent weather events. In Russia, the harsh but normally manageable winter has become a catalyst for disaster, as institutional and economic collapse destroy social safety-nets and the very basis upon which people make a living. In Ecuador, recovery from the latest El Niño may take a decade – but two more could strike in that time. In Indonesia, drought-induced hunger and smog from wildfires combined with economic chaos to provoke popular unrest and the fall of a government.

This compounding of extreme climatic events with rapid economic and institutional transition – or collapse – presents a complex profile for future disasters. The poor, forced to live on marginal land in urban and coastal areas where jobs are concentrated, will suffer most as the planet warms and disaster strikes – 96 per cent of all deaths from natural disasters already happen in developing countries. Yet plunging aid budgets, retreating

governments and the divergent dynamics of debt and globalization are leaving the world's poorest behind – paralysed by lack of resources, education, prospects or security. This deadly combination of environmental change, economic inequity and political inaction will dominate the future of the humanitarian scene.

Responding to this challenge will require a re-application of the old principle of 'thinking globally, acting locally'. Externally-driven aid can save lives in the aftermath of conflict. But responding to the threat of flood, drought and earthquake must start locally. Disaster preparedness has to be built through community mechanisms, linked to an international humanitarian system which is able, rapidly and efficiently, to reinforce indigenous efforts.

The harnessing of local capabilities and knowledge to international resources and advocacy for environmental, economic and political change may prove to be the crucial determinant of effective disaster response in the 21st century.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Weber', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

George Weber
Secretary General