Baharullah was crying while he told his story He came from the district of Shar-e-Buzurg in Badakhshan province where the earthquake struck hardest. As in February, most victims were women, children and the elderly – caught inside while the men worked the fields. Two other districts in neighbouring Takhar province were also hit badly: Chah-Ab and, for the second time in four months, Rustaq.

For the next fortnight, three or four aftershocks a day shattered more homes and ripped the delicate psychological fabric of the survivors. Many were too terrified to spend another night under a roof and slept out in the fields, only to fall foul of pneumonia and respiratory infections as spring storms lashed down. Sodden with rain, entire hillsides slid down the steep-sided valleys, taking with them farmers, livestock, top-soil and any hopes of replanting for the next harvest.

Quick response

The May earthquake was more powerful and extensive than the one in February, destroying the homes and affecting the lives of five times more Afghans The international response was quicker agencies still in the region rehabilitating after the first quake raised the alarm. Key players with February fresh in their minds had a better idea of how to respond. And many veterans of the first quake had established that level of trust between each other vital for rapid cooperation in a crisis. The weather was less severe, enabling quicker access. But the vast extent of damage across so many inaccessible mountain ridges meant that while coordination and cooperation may have improved second time round, the lack of rapidly-deployable resources – particularly helicopters – hampered the relief effort. And despite an enormous amount of effort and goodwill on the part of many aid workers, some of February's mistakes were repeated.

News broke on the day of the quake as NGOs, working on rehabilitation after the February earthquake, alerted their headquarters. UN officials based in Faizabad, 70 km to the east, felt the ground shake and warned UNOCHA in Islamabad. The USGS – after verifying magnitude depth and location – alerted international organizations within six hours.

First to the rescue were the local communities, who buried their dead, tended to the injured and reported initial casualty figures and needs to nearby NGOs ACTED, Concern and the Cooperation Centre for Afghanistan (CCA). Within 24 hours, the first Red Cross/Red Crescent relief team had arrived and divided the area into two separate operational zones: western (Rustaq and Chah-Ab districts) and eastern (Shar-e-Burzurg district). While much of the western zone could be accessed by road, Shar-e-Buzurg was so remote that helicopters and donkeys were used to aid survivors

Both the UN and the ICRC chose Faizabad as their main operational hub to cover the eastern zone. The UN first had to clear 90,000 square metres of mined airfield and secure the area. To guarantee the safety of the heavy air traffic anticipated, OCHA Geneva mobilized an air-operations team seconded from the Dutch Ministry of Defence, which arrived in location on 7 June. In Rustaq, aid agencies cooperated in setting up an operational/health centre to cover the western zone – supplied mainly by road after Kwaja Ghar airstrip became too dangerous to use. A sub-base was set up in Chah-Ab.

But communications were still as bad as in February with very poor passage of information between Rustaq and Faizabad, and back to Islamabad. A specialist communications team from Swiss Disaster Relief was sent out on 2 June, but took two weeks to establish a reliable e-mail link from the front line back to headquarters.

Muddled assessment and delivery

The first relief targeted medical evacuations and delivered one week's food to survivors. Shelter and clean water were considered crucial, since tens of thousands were sleeping rough on mountainsides in filthy conditions. But, as in February, attempts at a coherent

needs-assessment were seriously hampered by lack of agency preparedness and difficulty in accessing the remote villages. Three small helicopters were employed but proved totally insufficient as medical evacuations took priority over information gathering. According to one UN report, "prioritization of needs was impossible during the first phase of the response. It was only by the end of June that detailed assessments of all affected villages were finalized" – by which time it was too much information, too late.

ICRC's Svante Yngrot claims prioritization of needs was made, but cultural factors aggravated attempts at aid: many Afghan men would not allow their women to be whisked away for treatment unaccompanied; others had more faith in the local mullah than foreigners in flying machines. And many agencies were short of the experienced field staff needed to make assessments in exhausting conditions. A rough system of prioritizing whole villages was eventually agreed upon: Category A (80 to 100 per cent of buildings damaged), B (50 to 80 per cent damaged), C (20 to 50 per cent damaged) and D (less than 20 per cent damaged). The system assumed that in A and B villages, higher levels of visible destruction meant weaker local coping mechanisms, leading to less self-help and therefore to more people in need of aid.

But poor communications led to different formats of assessment being adopted in eastern and western zones. Traumatized survivors were quizzed too late or too often, leading to

Box 5.2 Political rivalries hamper recovery

Two decades of war have made Afghanistan both a military and political minefield. In December 1979, a vast Soviet army invaded to take control of the fledgling Afghan Communist Party. For ten years, the Afghan *mujahideen* fought a holy war with huge amounts of military aid flooding in from the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The Soviets were no match for Afghan guerrilla tactics, and concentrated their efforts on destroying rural areas by aerial bombardment. This drove millions of Afghans into exile abroad, or into urban areas where they could be more easily controlled. Since the Soviets withdrew in 1989, rival *mujahideen* factions – many of which had stockpiled both US and looted Russian weaponry – began to fight each other for supremacy. Neighbouring countries have continued to pour financial and military aid into Afghanistan in order to promote their own strategic agenda.

The only government to be recognized by the West during this period was that of Burhannudin Rabbani, president from 1992 until the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996. The four years of his rule saw more devastation in the capital and other Afghan towns due to internecine fighting than during the whole of the Soviet war.

From 1994 to 1998, the extraordinarily rapid spread of the Taliban (lit. 'seekers' or Sunni Muslim religious students) has brought temporary security to 90 per cent of the country, but at the expense of brutal human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing of minority Shia Muslim Hazaras.

The remote north-east of Afghanistan, around Rustaq, has been largely untouched by either the Soviet war, or the subsequent civil war which has raged since 1989. Two decades of conflict have, however, prevented any economic development in the region. Mountain farmers, cut off by both geography and politics, have no opportunities to trade, and struggle to subsist on livestock and rain-fed crops.

President Rabbani was born in Faizabad, near the epicentres of both quakes. He controls the whole of Badakhshan province with the help of his military right-hand man, Ahmed Shah Massoud. It was Massoud's forces which gathered and forwarded to Dushanbe the first information on the February earthquake, and which provided the first emergency relief. President Rabbani provided both money (3.5 billion Afghanis/US$ 50,000) for victims, and sent his Deputy Foreign Minister Dr Abdullah to Rustaq to coordinate inter-agency meetings and relief operations for three weeks after the February quake.

Even the Taliban set aside political differences in the face of February's disaster. They announced a three-day ceasefire and sent a truck of aid into 'enemy territory'. But their offensive in August 1998 which swept through Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, overrunning (briefly) Rabbani's strongholds in Taloqan and Faizabad, seriously hampered aid agencies' efforts to rehabilitate the area in the aftermath of disaster.

And the Taliban's medieval interpretation of sharia (Islamic law) prevents agencies and donors from promoting the humanitarian and economic development the country desperately needs to rebuild its shattered infrastructure. Without such development, Afghanistan's ability to cope with future disasters cannot grow.

'assessment fatigue' and widespread confusion about what type and quantity of aid would be delivered. Agencies desperate to make the most of limited helicopter assets often dumped relief items near villages without explaining how much aid villagers could expect, where, why or for how long. After several weeks, local officials in Shah-e-Buzurg recommended distribution should halt since it was seen to be so unfair that aid aircraft ran the risk of being shot at. Subsequently, the tailplane of a WFP Antonov cargo plane en route to Faizabad was peppered with AK-47 rounds by an irate Afghan.

Fresh survey teams were sent into the eastern zone to reassess the situation more fairly, prioritizing needs of families not whole villages. Distribution points were established with local commanders, and village representatives would converge to claim their share of aid. Monitoring teams led by International Federation and ARCS staff were sent out to ensure the right amounts of relief were reaching the right people.

The innovation of prioritizing aid by family was never adopted in the western zone, but fortunately sheer geography prevented Afghans in the west from ever finding out. Nevertheless, aid distribution in Chah-Ab was held up nearly a week when the local commander claimed the number of beneficiaries had been miscalculated.

Local military commanders were more mischievous and opportunistic in May/June than before, and tried using aid to 'buy' support from villages for their own power struggles. But in part they were exploiting flaws in an incoherent assessment and distribution strategy, poorly communicated not only between international aid agencies, but also through to village level. The use of short-wave radio to broadcast relief objectives to survivors – or at least to *shura* members and local commanders – was not contemplated. This was despite *New Home New Life*, a successful radio drama pioneered by the BBC World Service and broadcast in Dari and Pashto languages out of Peshawar into Afghanistan, which communicates messages on subjects as diverse as health and hygiene, drug abuse, mine awareness and peace-building.

Coordination and cooperation

In a remarkable act of cooperative spirit, the ICRC moved its operational base from Kabul to Islamabad at the outset of the relief effort in order to coordinate more closely with UNOCHA. Alfredo Witschi-Cestari, UN coordinator in Islamabad, claimed of the UN and Red Cross/Red Crescent joint operations: "There was wonderful coordination – we consider it to be a unique case." But the ICRC's Svante Yngrot argued: "Coordination was worse second time – there were more actors with different agendas making effective coordination more difficult." Nevertheless, agency responsibilities were divided up as for the February operation.

Relations with local authorities during the second earthquake were less helpful, according to Sarah Russell, UNOCHA's public information officer, "partly because important figures were distracted by the war, which they weren't in February because it was low season for fighting." But lack of a coordinated approach to assessment and distribution between Faizabad and Rustaq also provoked hostility among local commanders.

Evaluations after the February quake had recommended that any future relief operations in the area should use Dushanbe as an operational hub. Although Islamabad remained the coordination centre, the UNDAC team and ICRC eventually organized airborne and overland relief convoys out of Tajikistan, although unresolved security and bureaucratic problems again interrupted operations.

The lack of helicopters seriously hampered many agencies – particularly the UN – in their attempts to assess and respond to the disaster. It took nearly a month to find enough aircraft. Why so long? Some offers, from the US and Pakistan governments for example, failed to materialize. Pakistan flew five military helicopters into Faizabad, ostensibly to deliver humanitarian aid, but seemed more interested in a political agenda with Northern

Alliance leaders. Military options proved too politically complicated or expensive. Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) tried to mobilize military helicopters, but were asked to pay for 150 international support staff to fly out and supervise operations in the region. Private companies didn't want to take the risk of flying into a war zone, or said their Russian pilots refused to fly there. Aircraft fuel was a constant problem as Tajik helicopter operators would not accept 'impure' Pakistani fuel – only Tajik fuel could be used, and had to be purchased at inflated prices.

While the ICRC organized airborne relief fairly quickly, the UN continued to battle for more helicopters and fuel – with inter-agency competition for the limited number of suppliers pushing up prices. NGOs grew increasingly impatient with unworkable hi-tech solutions. The French NGO ACTED mounted a very effective overland truck operation from Tajikistan. Other NGOs commissioned donkey convoys to trek in from Shah-e-Buzurg with badly-needed food and shelter items. For the NGOs, helicopters became known as 'unicorns' – potent but mythical

By late June, a combination of 14 ICRC- and UN-chartered helicopters and aircraft (including two huge Antonovs with airdrop capacity) established air-bridges between Dushanbe, Peshawar and Faizabad to deliver fuel and aid. Eventually 1,510 tonnes of food and 604 tonnes of non-food relief were provided – three times more than for the first earthquake.

Rehabilitation

"To tell you the truth, I am not in a position to rebuild my house. I am a farmer and am busy with harvesting now. If I don't harvest, we will die from hunger and if I don't rebuild my house, we will die from winter coldness. I am confused and don't know what to do. I am going to become mad. I need somebody to help me rebuild my house. One room for my whole family and a stable for my animals will make me a happy man."

Mohammad Esaq of Katik village in Shah-e-Buzurg was one of thousands still traumatized by the shock of losing so much so violently, having to face impossible decisions with a bitter winter looming.

Once the 'emergency' was deemed over, most agencies pulled out, leaving just a handful of NGOs to help tens of thousands like Mohammad Esaq. Some agencies hid behind their mandates – "rehabilitation isn't our business". For others, the security situation became too dangerous. Or competing priorities loomed in a country torn apart by civil war and excessive abuse of women's rights.

For those affected by the disasters, migration was not an option. Most were either tenant farmers or landowners and could not afford to move. Nor was there anywhere to move to, since the whole of north-east Afghanistan is earthquake-prone, and further afield are international borders and front lines. So rehabilitation became the key priority. And where to rebuild became a major dilemma, since many villages were sited on old 'slumps' – vast mounds of highly unstable earth left behind from previous landslides.

The ICRC – so effective during the relief phase – did not launch a rehabilitation appeal nor ensured continuity of support for suffering Afghans through the ARCS. WFP donated 3,200 tonnes of wheat, but security threats forced all UN staff to evacuate the area. Some NGOs remained: ARCS, MERLIN and SCA monitored health needs; Oxfam briefly supervised repairs to water networks, crucial for drinking, irrigation and mixing mud to build new homes; and ACTED surveyed 14 000 homes which needed to be rebuilt. An Irish NGO Concern employed an engineering expert who discovered that a generation back locals made their houses more earthquake-resistant by building them from flexible mountain timber. In the last two decades, logging mafias operating on the Afghan/Pakistan border have plundered these precious reserves into extinction. They could be replanted, but in the meantime, Afghans have been rebuilding each of their homes as a single, rudimentary room three metres square, in return for food-for-work from WFP. By early December 1998, all 14,000 'homes' had been finished.

In addition to WFP's wheat, funds for rehabilitation from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), SCA and the Swedish aid agency SIDA totalled around US$ 1.5 million. According to one UN official, this could have been much more if the tiny window of opportunity – opened by the world's media at the time disaster struck – had been exploited to launch rehabilitation and relief appeals simultaneously. And assessments of rehabilitation needs could be carried out during the emergency phase to help bridge the gap left by departing relief agencies.

Political and military factors had less impact than might have been expected during the relief phase. But, in August 1998, the Taliban offensive through Mazar-e-Sharif and the north-east, followed by US tomahawk missiles targeting Osama bin Laden in eastern Afghanistan, forced most international staff to evacuate to Pakistan, bringing rehabilitation efforts to a virtual halt. Soon after the US attacks, an Italian member of the UN's Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA) died after his vehicle was shot at in Kabul. Fraser Mackay, director of Afghanaid, one of the main NGOs working in Badakhshan, said: "The US rocketing of eastern Afghanistan turned a difficult working environment into an impossible one. The consequences for the people of Afghanistan are not good."

Box 5.3 A press officer's perspective

An earthquake in the mountainous north-east of Afghanistan has all the ingredients of a good story: poverty-stricken victims, impossible terrain, a long-running civil war in the background, and the looming presence of a hard-line Islamic faction that has won international fame for its harsh treatment of women. Last year, Afghanistan had two earthquakes. The first, in February, attracted around 30 journalists. The second, at the end of May, was even more of a draw. Entire villages had been flattened. Settlements perched on the edge of mud cliffs had been hurled down the mountainsides into the valleys below. Roads had been obliterated by landslides. Local authorities estimated that 4,000 had died and a further 50,000 left homeless.

The first journalists appeared with the first aid workers, the day after the May quake struck. Within three days, between 70 and 80 hacks had assembled at Faizabad airport – a corrugated metal runway with a smattering of one-storey adobe buildings and destroyed military vehicles. As satellite dishes, satphones, laptops, and sophisticated editing and transmission equipment mushroomed around the airstrip, the local inhabitants stared on in disbelief. But they soon worked out that for anyone with a room or a vehicle to rent out, it was bonanza time. The situation could have easily degenerated into chaos.

The initial phase of the operation depended entirely on helicopters. There was an acute shortage of these, and competition for seats was fierce. Aid agencies were desperate to get medical teams into damaged villages. The journalists, most of whom had to justify heavy travelling expenses to their editors, were equally desperate to get in to where the action was and get their stories out.

The ugly scenarios that sometimes develop during emergencies, with hard-pressed aid workers and journalists squabbling and failing to understand each other's priorities, never seemed to materialize. Agencies strictly rationed helicopter seats, with just a few journalists taking off each day. TV companies pooled their earthquake footage, mixing it with their own interviews and pictures shot on the airstrip. Print journalists and photographers did likewise.

Their efforts paid dividends. Twenty-four hours after the journalists started work, donor governments started calling with offers of help. The US government announced it was hiring two choppers to bolster the relief operation. Other governments offered money.

But although it was easy enough to stir up pledges of cash, it seemed impossible to get a firm commitment out of any helicopter contracting company in the Commonwealth of Independent States or other neighbouring countries such as Pakistan. And helicopters have to come from nearby – they cannot be ferried halfway across the world like aeroplanes. Some suppliers demanded absurdly high sums of money. Others kept promising a definite answer the next day but never delivered. Some claimed their aircrews refused to fly in Afghanistan. Others said it was impossible to get insurance cover to fly in such a dangerous country.

By the end of the first week, the journalists were billing this as yet another 'troubled' Afghan relief operation. Aid agencies were limping along with only four helicopters to get injured people out and take food and shelter supplies in. It was another fortnight before a respectable fleet of 12 helicopters was assembled, backed up with road convoys from Tajikistan and cargo planes from Pakistan and Tajikistan. And by then, of course, the journalists, who had been so instrumental in raising awareness of the problems, had moved on to the next story.

Lessons learned?

"Our biggest mistake in the second earthquake was the over-reliance on high-tech solutions in a desperately low-tech area," claims Bradley Foerster, UNOCHA's focal point in Islamabad for the relief operation. He admits the obsession to find helicopters consumed huge amounts of time, effort and money – and was not sufficiently questioned. Alternative solutions – engaging local people in assessments and donkey convoys for example – should have been pursued at the same time as airborne options, and would have proved far cheaper, quicker and more effective. "Our Western approach to the problem was: Give me a machine," says Foerster, adding: "The voices of Afghans were not heard."

So were any lessons from the first earthquake applied in response to the second? Comparing the two quakes is problematic because the geography and weather in each event were so different. Disaster notification and immediate response were quicker, if only because agencies happened to be in the area already. But one key lesson from February – the need for rapid and ongoing joint-agency assessments – was not applied. Assessment and distribution methods second time round were probably more confused than before

Dushanbe was better utilized as a logistics hub than in February. But despite knowing that initial assessment and aid delivery could be achieved quickest by air, the UN took nearly three weeks to find enough aircraft. One senior aid official involved in both operations noted: "It took a depressingly long time for the UN to get it all together – a disgrace really, after having a dress rehearsal a few months before."

Cooperation was enhanced when the ICRC moved from Kabul to Islamabad. But again, incompatible radio and communications systems in the field and an unclear chain of command hampered information flows and attempts at coordination.

Disaster preparedness

A key lesson recommended by most evaluations, but not yet acted on, is the need for an inter-agency approach to regional disaster preparedness. The WFP-proposed joint evaluation has not extended beyond logistical issues, nor beyond Islamabad OCHA and the UN Development Programme – between them responsible for the UN system's natural disaster response and preparedness programmes – have done nothing in this direction.

According to Sarah Longford, author of a detailed evaluation on the UN response to the February quake, "One assumption is safe: it will happen again." So what type of disaster preparedness (DP) programme would be most appropriate? Longford argues that the UN, Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGOs should jointly develop a regional approach to DP which encompasses *existing* agency and international capacities – rather than building stockpiles of relief equipment and food which then become a security risk. Yasemin Aysan, head of DP for the International Federation, emphasizes the need to "create a basic structure of plans and partnerships which can be scaled up in a disaster."

Local-level DP could complement this approach. Peter Marsden of the British Agencies Afghanistan Group suggests that "In any disaster situation, those who are directly affected will have done 90 per cent of the work before the agencies fly in. Self-help will happen automatically, and people will do what they can to cope. So local authorities should develop systems of disaster assessment and response, based on local knowledge, specific to each individual village."

While the ARCS has potentially the best national network through which to promote local-level DP, as an organization auxiliary to the government, its structure and effectiveness is as fragmented as that of Afghan politics itself. Nevertheless, the International Federation is working with the ARCS to train 500 staff and volunteers nationwide in community-based disaster preparedness, building on the 2,300 Afghans already first-aid trained. And, as part of the DP programme, non-food items sufficient for 210,000 people will be stockpiled in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Herat

But how realistic or relevant is local-level DP in a war zone? Aid agency stores have been repeatedly looted by different warring factions. And with more pressing priorities in Afghanistan like mine-blast victims, widowed mothers forced out of work to beg on the streets, and under-five mortality rates running at over 25 per cent, disaster preparedness is quickly pushed down the agenda. According to Afghanaid, Badakhshan is a food-deficit area for about three months of the year, so villagers are unlikely to stockpile grain for use in emergencies Freezing conditions force farmers to burn any spare timber for cooking and to keep warm – denuding mountains and threatening more landslides. When there is no more wood, they burn animal dung, which should go onto the land as fertilizer. The resultant combination of soil erosion and soil infertility spirals down into a deeper and deeper food deficit, increasing vulnerability to natural hazards.

Afghans in the mountainous north-east deserve more long-term solutions than simply first aid and DP training. They badly need the advice and resources to establish their homes on safer sites than the disaster-prone 'slumps' where many are perched. They need support stimulating local livelihoods, growing the right trees to rebuild their houses and protect their land; planting alternative and quicker-growing crops to combat food deficits; building better roads to reach cash-crop markets and to improve access for the next emergency. Afghanaid, along with infrastructure projects, has pioneered honey cultivation to help provide farmers with a self-sustaining living. A small first step, but few other agencies are working in this remote area at all.

How best deal with future natural disasters in Afghanistan? A three-tiered strategy is needed, going beyond the media-driven staccato relief responses seen last year:

- Long-term development programmes to strengthen local resistance to the effects of natural hazards This will take decades to bear fruit and may never provide complete protection against earthquakes on the scale experienced in 1998. Hence a role remains for.

- Aid agencies to act as an international emergency service. But for future interventions to succeed, agencies must boost their collective regional disaster preparedness and response capacities – and learn the lessons of 1998. Spanning these two:

- Local disaster preparedness to plug the gap of 72 hours or more it takes for effective international relief to arrive. In most countries the government, army or emergency services can provide. But in Afghanistan where government is fragmented or indifferent, smaller groupings – *shuras*, ad hoc commissions, 'civil society' – play this role. Strengthening existing local expertise in emergency preparedness, rapid assessments and first aid could ensure more Afghans survive those first crucial hours and days.

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