

## INTERNATIONAL DISASTER RELIEF

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An essay on a Ditchley Foundations conference held at Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire, England on the weekend of 19-21 February 1993.

### INTRODUCTION

The Ditchley conference on international disaster relief convened at a time when the issue of humanitarian aid to victims of natural and man-made disaster was in the forefront of international public consciousness, perhaps as never before.

Television images of efforts to forestall mass starvation in Somalia and to get food and medicine to besieged war victims in the former Yugoslavia have been seared into the minds of the general public and policymakers. The military have assumed a newly visible leading role in humanitarian aid. Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), NATO and the United Nations are all increasingly consumed with the practice and the politics of relief. As one conference participant put it, "Humanitarian concerns are now - for better and for worse - a part of the mainstream political dialogue". And news of the latest troubles and breakdowns, as well as of the next likely appearance of famine's spectre - in war- and drought-plagued Southern Sudan - faced the conference participants with the arrival of the morning newspaper.

The conference also came near the end of the first full year of operations of the new and much-heralded United Nations structure established to deal with these concerns, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, headed by UN Under Secretary General Jan Eliasson. Amid a general perception that the demand throughout the world for humanitarian assistance to victims of disaster, as well as the pressure on these efforts to produce solid results, will only increase in the months and years to come, the conference participants sought to learn from past failures (and, to a lesser extent, from successes).

The conference was formally charged with a focus limited to response to natural disasters, as distinguished from those attributable to manmade causes such as war and civil unrest. However, this distinction proved less than entirely useful in categorizing and analyzing the effectiveness of responses to today's complex, multi-faceted disasters. The prevalence of, and the need for effective mechanisms to deal with, humanitarian crises having multiple causes and no clear resolution became a central core of the Ditchley conversation.

The overall tone of the conference was somewhat bleak. We found ourselves focusing heavily on the

shortcomings of the international response to a mushrooming array of human needs around the world, with a prevailing sense of a system that has largely failed to meet those needs. Introspection and self-criticism were the order of the day for a group of participants drawn from a wide spectrum of non-governmental organizations, donor nations and international organizations.

To an extent this self-criticism reflects a constructive striving for improvement. Sometimes, however, it succumbs to the temptation of invalidating an entire galaxy of efforts that have in the past produced historic breakthroughs and saved millions of human lives and continue to do so today. Finding the proper balance - a balance that challenges rather than stifles - remains a real challenge.

### WHAT IS IN STORE?

Looking ahead just seven years to the beginning of the third millennium, it is difficult to project a global scenario without increased levels of conflict, poverty, instability and disaster. Increasing population pressures in many parts of the world, the persistent reality of poverty and chronic hunger for a quarter of the world's people, and the vacuum left by the collapse of a superpower - dominated bipolar world order can only result in increasing vulnerability for many.

In 1989 a Ditchley conference on refugees and migration discussed the extent to which the worldwide explosion of involuntary migration is one of the great issues of our time. While the focus of the present conference was not on the causes of conflict and resulting human tragedy, but rather on the provision of needed humanitarian assistance, it cannot go unmentioned that the dissolution of historical political boundaries and the erosion of the sovereignty and integrity of nation-states in many parts of the world has led to an increased number of people living outside the protections afforded by stable governmental and societal structures.

Even seemingly random "natural disasters" are directly related to the way we live our lives. Deforestation of mountains causes soil erosion and increases the likelihood of landslides in heavy rain. The lack of available land forces poor people to build their homes on steep hillsides in earthquake-prone areas. Seasonal flooding of river basins and deltas becomes