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ABBREVIATIONS

AID	Agency for International Development
GAO	General Accounting Office
OSRO	Office of Sahel Relief Operations
U.N.	United Nations
UNDRO	United Nations Disaster Relief Office
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Program

COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

NEED FOR AN INTERNATIONAL
DISASTER RELIEF AGENCY
Department of State
Agency for International Development

D I G E S T

A massive and generous worldwide relief effort was recently mounted to respond to the disastrous famine in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa. In the absence of an effective mechanism to coordinate and control this response, each donor independently planned, programed, and implemented its relief operations with little overall coordination.

Predictably, serious problems developed and the tremendous resources made available were not used as efficiently as possible to feed the starving people.

The world community urgently needs to work together to create and support an international disaster relief agency that will ultimately be capable of mounting and carrying out an integrated response to disasters.

The U.N. Disaster Relief Office was established to act as an international focal and coordination point during disasters. It has not been given the responsibilities, authority, or resource base to perform the functions GAO believes will be needed in future relief efforts.

It is, however, a base that can be built on, and the U.N., with its broad membership and other advantages, is perhaps the best location for an international disaster relief agency. (See p. 5.)

As a step in this direction, GAO recommends (see p. 11) that the Secretary of State lead the U.N. in:

1. Encouraging all member governments to pledge to build on the U.N. Disaster Relief Office and strengthen its relief coordination capabilities.

2. Developing disaster response contingency plans and developing agreements with U.N. agencies that specify the role and responsibilities of each agency as well as the amounts and types of resources they can make available in disasters.
3. Urging potential donor nations to articulate a disaster response policy and to enter into advance understandings with the Disaster Relief Office about the kinds of resources they will make available under the Office's coordination.

GAO's review of the Sahel relief effort clearly showed the need for stronger coordination by a single disaster relief agency:

- Although the Disaster Relief Office had been established, it did not respond in Sahel.
- Two other U.N. agencies, the World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization, tried to coordinate donor efforts, with only sporadic success. (See pp. 19 to 22.)
- Donors generally provided relief bilaterally, without adequate coordination.

Consequently, serious coordination and management problems arose in every phase of the relief operation.

- Donors gave food aid in 1973 without knowing the reasonableness of the Sahel nations' requests or what other donors were providing. A 1974 multidonor mission independently assessed the Sahel nations' needs, but a lack of coordination still resulted in a gap in food deliveries to at least one nation. (See p. 22.)
- Donors scheduled their own food shipments, causing massive port congestion and extended storage under improper conditions. (See p. 24.)
- Lack of a coordinated system for moving all donor food inland quickly resulted in

backups and storage under improper conditions, increasing infestation and spoilage. (See p. 25.)

--No system existed to monitor food distribution, and reports indicate that the Sahel governments did not always get the food to their people. (See p. 33.)

The U.N. Disaster Relief Office is being strengthened but it will need time to develop into a fully effective disaster relief agency. (See ch. 4.)

The Department of State and the Agency for International Development agree with GAO's specific recommendations for immediately strengthening the relief coordination capabilities of the Disaster Relief Office. However, they believe that GAO's proposal for an international disaster relief agency capable of mounting and carrying out an integrated response to disasters would not be accepted by the international community, even in the distant future. (See p. 8.)

GAO believes that an international disaster relief agency is the best long-range solution, but it recognizes that considerable time and effort will be required to generate the necessary support among nations. For the present, GAO believes the first need is to build the Disaster Relief Office into an effective coordinating mechanism. (See pp. 9 to 12.)