

## CHAPTER 4

### U.N. DISASTER RELIEF OFFICE

#### AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Even before world attention focused on the Sahel, recognition of the growing need for international cooperation in responding to disasters led the nations of the world to recommend that a permanent office in the United Nations serve as an international focal point for disaster relief. This chapter analyzes UNDRO, its responsibilities and functions, its limited role in recent disasters, and current U.N. efforts to strengthen it. The chapter also discusses those critical elements which this office will still lack after being strengthened and which are, in our view, crucial to developing a truly effective international disaster relief agency.

#### ORGANIZATION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

U.N. Resolution 2816 led to the establishment of UNDRO in March 1972 to (1) mobilize and coordinate international relief in actual disasters and (2) promote predisaster planning and preparedness. The key provisions of Resolution 2816 describe the specific responsibilities assigned to UNDRO and how it is expected to interface with the rest of the international community.

The resolution called upon the U.N. Secretary General to appoint a disaster relief coordinator, who would report directly to the Secretary General and who would be authorized, on his behalf, to:

- Establish and maintain the closest cooperation with all organizations concerned and to make all feasible advance arrangements to insure the most effective assistance.
- Mobilize, direct, and coordinate the relief activities of the various U.N. organizations in response to a request for disaster assistance from a stricken nation.
- Coordinate U.N. assistance with assistance given by intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations.
- Receive, on behalf of the Secretary General, contributions offered to him for disaster relief assistance to be carried out by U.N. organizations for particular emergency situations.

- Help the government of the stricken country to assess its relief and other needs and to evaluate the priority of those needs, to disseminate that information to prospective donors and others concerned, and to serve as a clearinghouse for assistance extended or planned by all sources of external aid.
- Promote the study, prevention, control, and prediction of natural disasters.
- Help advise governments on predisaster planning in association with relevant voluntary organizations.
- Acquire and disseminate information on planning and coordinating disaster relief, including the improvement and establishment of stockpiles in disaster-prone areas, and to prepare suggestions on the most effective use of available resources.

Finally, the resolution recommended that UNDRO maintain contact with governments and U.N. agencies concerning (1) aid available in emergency situations, such as food supplies, medicines, personnel, transportation, and communications and (2) advice given to countries on predisaster planning and preparedness.

The resolution invited potential recipient governments to (1) establish disaster contingency plans with appropriate assistance from UNDRO, (2) appoint a single national disaster relief coordinator to facilitate the receipt of international aid in times of emergency, (3) establish stockpiles of emergency supplies, such as tents, blankets, medicines, and non-perishable foodstuffs, (4) arrange for training of administrative and relief personnel, (5) consider appropriate legislative or other measures to facilitate the receipt of aid, including measures granting overflight and landing rights and necessary privileges and immunities for relief units, and (6) improve their national disaster warning systems.

The resolution invited potential donor nations to (1) respond promptly to any call by the Secretary General or, on his behalf, by UNDRO, (2) continue offering, on a wider basis, emergency assistance in disaster situations, and (3) inform UNDRO in advance about the facilities and services they might be in a position to provide immediately, including, where possible, relief units, logistical support, and means of effective communications.

These provisions show that, as presently constituted, UNDRO's primary role in a disaster is to evaluate the relief needs of stricken nations and to generate and coordinate

a donor response by keeping donors continuously informed as to what these needs are and what each donor is contributing.

The resolution does give UNDRO direct authority to manage contributions made available to it for specific disasters and, perhaps to a lesser extent, to direct the activities of such independent U.N. agencies as the U.N. Children's Fund and the World Health Organization in a disaster. However, these U.N. inputs constitute a relatively small portion of the total contribution in a disaster. Thus, the bilateral donors who provide the majority of relief supplies and finances and international and private voluntary agencies will continue to plan what their contributions will be in a disaster and, essentially, to carry out and manage their own relief programs from beginning to end.

In keeping with the above concepts, UNDRO has been organized as a small office in the U.N. system with no resource base--disaster relief supplies, operational funding, etc.--of its own. Although the United Nations has approved an expansion of UNDRO's staff to a total of 41 members, as of late 1974 it consisted of 6 professionals, including the disaster relief coordinator and 5 general service personnel. The professionals are divided among the executive office and the prevention and planning and relief coordination sections.

To carry out its responsibilities, UNDRO has made arrangements for the U.N. Development Program's resident representatives to act as UNDRO's "eyes and ears" in the disaster-prone developing nations, both in predisaster and actual disaster situations. These representatives are located in some 90 developing nations and are the senior U.N. representatives or "ambassadors." They have been assigned responsibility for working out predisaster cooperative arrangements with host governments and with other U.N. agencies in country and for establishing liaison with embassies of the various bilateral donors and with voluntary agencies in the developing nations.

UNDRO has also been seeking to establish working arrangements with the independent U.N. agencies so it can draw on their expertise (e.g., that of the World Health Organization in medicine and of the World Food Program and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization in food supplies), staff, procurement, and other capabilities. By working through the U.N. Development Program and the other U.N. agencies in this manner, UNDRO would develop "arms and legs" for use when a disaster strikes.

## LIMITED ROLE IN RECENT DISASTERS

In his 1973 and 1974 annual reports and in various statements to the United Nations, the disaster relief coordinator has repeatedly pointed out that lack of adequate resources has prevented UNDRO from effectively discharging its responsibilities. The small UNDRO staff has been a limiting factor, particularly during simultaneous multiple disasters. Lack of travel funds has been another; UNDRO was allocated only \$27,000 for 1974 and 1975. The coordinator told us that this sum was grossly inadequate for UNDRO's needs; as a result, UNDRO had to delay field visits to disaster-stricken areas. He also stated that, on numerous occasions, UNDRO has had to seek free transportation for its staff members on a space-available basis from international air carriers, with only limited success.

Notwithstanding these and other limitations, UNDRO has been trying to coordinate disaster relief. The coordinator's annual report of June 1974 and statements before the U.N. Economic and Social Council in July 1974 described some of UNDRO's activities in recent disasters. The coordinator noted that recipient governments often request UNDRO assistance in coordinating relief action, particularly for international relief. He cited the Pakistan floods of 1973, stating that the Government of Pakistan had requested UNDRO to mobilize international assistance. A senior UNDRO officer went immediately to Pakistan to help out in local coordination and in assessing emergency relief requirements.

During the Ethiopian drought of 1973, an UNDRO representative went to Ethiopia twice to help the government establish a central relief coordination office and to further assess the situation. As needs were identified, this information was disseminated to donors, special relief projects were developed by U.N. agencies, and the Food and Agriculture Organization agreed to monitor large-scale pledges, shipments, and deliveries. At UNDRO's request, donors made available sufficient funds for UNICEF to purchase 25 four-wheel-drive trucks. The British Government made available 20 more of these trucks, on the condition that UNDRO fund the airlift. The coordinator stated that, within 10 days after his request, donors had pledged the necessary funds and the airlift had been scheduled to begin within 1 week.

Thus, UNDRO has been performing at least some of the functions necessary to insure a prompt and effective response to a major disaster.

## EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN UNDRO

Late in 1974, the United States and 29 other countries sponsored Resolution 3243 calling upon the U.N. Secretary General to provide sufficient staff, equipment, and facilities to strengthen UNDRO's ability to efficiently and effectively mobilize and coordinate international disaster relief.

The resolution was passed on November 29, 1974. To implement it, the coordinator convened a panel of three disaster relief managers <sup>1/</sup> who had extensive experience on a national level to advise him on strengthening relief coordination capabilities. The panel presented its report and recommendations to the coordinator in February 1975.

Within this same timeframe, some bilateral donors expressed a strong interest in strengthening UNDRO's pre-disaster planning and prevention functions. Their desire to contribute funds for this purpose led the UNDRO staff to develop appropriate proposals.

By March 1975, both the coordinator and U.N. Headquarters had accepted the panel's report and the staff proposals, as discussed below, and UNDRO is now authorized to implement them.

### Relief coordination proposals

For UNDRO, the panel recommends:

- Greatly increased staffing; latest indications are that the staff will increase to a total of 41 members, including about 23 professionals.
- Major increases in communications equipment, including mobile transceivers to use in communicating from disaster sites and a coordination center in Geneva for housing that equipment, archives, a data bank, and other requirements.
- Negotiation of written working arrangements with U.N. agencies to institutionalize present informal understandings of (1) the roles and responsibilities of each in a disaster and (2) the assistance these

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<sup>1/</sup>The heads of civil defense for the Government of the Philippines and of the AID Foreign Disaster Relief Office and the former head of the French Government's disaster relief organization.

agencies will provide in procurement, transportation, and special staff secondments.

- Establishment and maintenance of close working relationships with governments and others who work in disaster relief to improve material cooperation and exchange of information. (For example, UNDRO should maintain a data bank on relief supplies stockpiled around the globe by donors and voluntary agencies.)
- Special orientation and training in disaster management for U.N. Development Program resident representatives and their staffs. This should include preparing detailed field handbooks.
- Field reinforcement of UNDRO representation in a major disaster situation with experts and experienced personnel from organizations in each geographic area of the world.
- Adequate travel funds and a blanket exemption from U.N. financial rules which, among other things, require U.N. approval from Geneva of contract proposals of \$20,000 or more.
- Development of the ability to distribute situation reports in a disaster and after-action reports and a systematic evaluation procedure to review and analyze "lessons learned."
- Consideration of establishing an advisory committee within the United Nations, composed of representatives of donor and recipient governments, to advise it on problems and matters of a substantive or broad policy nature.

#### Predisaster planning proposals

The UNDRO staff's proposal paper considers predisaster planning as encompassing disaster prevention and predisaster preparedness. It notes, however, that these fields have not been defined but are new areas in which the amount of activity will be determined by the political wishes of member nations. Essentially, UNDRO proposes to:

- Advise governments on disaster prevention and preparedness, including supporting experts and technical cooperation projects for such purposes as establishing national disaster contingency plans and establishing stockpiles of emergency supplies.

- Initiate projects to promote the study, prevention, control, and prediction of natural disasters.
- Prepare periodic reports on technological and other developments.
- Hold seminars and develop a fellowship program on disaster prevention and preparedness for disaster-prone nations.

As these proposals show, UNDRO's work in these fields will be carried out mostly by consultants and experts. The paper notes that such work is going on but only to a limited extent, due primarily to a lack of resources. One severe limitation has been a lack of staff. Another has been the lack of funds, and the paper notes that development of the technical assistance program will depend on (1) the developing nations' increasing their awareness of UNDRO's role--which hopefully might result in more projects being financed by the United Nations Development Program and (2) voluntary contributions.

#### HOW TO BUILD ON UNDRO

The establishment of UNDRO is, in our view, a step by the international community toward recognizing its responsibility for collective action to minimize human suffering and losses caused by disasters. Current U.N. efforts to provide additional resources for UNDRO and to strengthen its relationships with the world community, particularly with U.N. agencies, both reflect the current limitations of UNDRO and recognize the need for strengthening the international fabric for disaster relief.

These efforts are, however, just a start, and our case study of the Sahel relief effort clearly shows the need for an effective international disaster relief agency fully capable of mounting and carrying out large-scale integrated disaster relief operations. To develop UNDRO into such an organization, it will be necessary to build on it and to give it the following responsibilities, authority, and resources.

#### Assign total responsibility

We believe that UNDRO needs to be strengthened so that ultimately it will be able to take full responsibility for mounting and carrying out relief efforts. This will place it in an operational and managerial role, in contrast to its present coordination, or catalyst, role. Thus, UNDRO will have to be assigned those responsibilities set forth

in chapter 1, including independently assessing relief needs of stricken nations; launching worldwide appeals for relief supplies; coordinating resources committed by donors; scheduling or arranging for ocean or air transportation and for inland transportation to landlocked nations where necessary; and monitoring and, as necessary, assisting stricken nations in the internal distribution of relief supplies.

Implicit in such responsibilities is the responsibility of UNDRO to respond to all disasters. The present and somewhat confused distribution of responsibility in this area within the United Nations needs to be clarified. Each U.N. agency should understand in advance what its role is to be in all situations; i.e., medical disasters, famines, and refugee problems. These agencies should also clearly understand their continuing role in responding to long-term disasters like the Sahel drought.

Currently, there is some question as to whether UNDRO or other U.N. agencies should respond to Sahel-type disasters. For example, we discussed UNDRO's response to future such situations with the disaster relief coordinator and his top staff. They stated that UNDRO has authority under its charter to immediately respond to any natural disaster at the host government's request and that it would respond to a Sahel-type disaster if the Secretary General designated it as the U.N. focal point. However, they distinguished between short-term aid (such as after an earthquake) and long-term aid (as in Sahel), and they indicated that the Food and Agriculture Organization or WFP should handle long-term disasters. They further stated that, if other U.N. agencies failed to respond, UNDRO would undoubtedly step in but that the length and extent of UNDRO involvement has not been defined and would be determined by the particular disaster.

#### Authorize management authority

UNDRO presently has no authority to direct or manage the overall relief effort in a disaster. U.N. member nations have not given it authority to direct their bilateral efforts, and it still has little actual authority over U.N. agencies. It is working, however, toward agreements with the agencies in this area.

To build UNDRO into an effective disaster relief agency, the U.N. member nations will have to formally give it the authority to direct their individual and collective efforts, together with those of the U.N. agencies, as part of one overall international relief effort. Similar authority should also be sought from international voluntary agencies



and others. As the experience of Sahel shows, a large and complex program like a major relief effort must have a top manager. Letting bilateral and other donors do their own managing and trying to keep them coordinated just will not work.

#### Commit donor resources

Currently, U.N. member nations have given UNDRO virtually no resource base to draw on when a disaster strikes. This is, of course, in keeping with the not yet fully realized concept of UNDRO as a focal point for coordinating the relief efforts of others.

The recent U.N. resolution and subsequent studies on strengthening UNDRO will result in additional resources, including increased staff and travel funds. However, UNDRO must rely on voluntary contributions for these increases. The experts' panel study recommended that UNDRO negotiate written arrangements with independent U.N. agencies specifying the various types of relief supplies and assistance these agencies will make available in a disaster. A top UNDRO official informed us in March 1975 that UNDRO had exchanged letters with the World Health Organization in this regard. He said that UNDRO hoped to reach an agreement with WFP in the near future but that reaching similar agreements with other U.N. agencies will probably take time.

UNDRO has also been able to draw contributions from donors for use in specific disasters. The coordinator reported that, through January 1975, donors had channeled more than \$25 million through UNDRO. In March 1975, a top official told us that UNDRO had a residual balance of only about \$50 thousand that had been freed for its use in any disaster. He said he felt that the next step in UNDRO's evolution would be for some government to act as its guarantor for specific amounts to meet operational needs.

Thus, although UNDRO has demonstrated the capability to use substantial funds for disaster relief, it still has virtually no standing resources. Instead it must wait until a disaster strikes and then solicit donor contributions for the stricken nation. Donors may or may not respond adequately or promptly as the Food and Agriculture Organization learned when it requested contributions to its trust fund. Donors also may or may not channel their relief contributions through UNDRO, resulting again in the possibility of multiple disaster relief managers.

To build UNDRO into an effective international disaster relief agency, the world community will have to provide it with the resources necessary to fulfill that expanded role. Among other things, UNDRO must have immediate access to medicines, food, shelter items (tents, blankets, clothing, etc.), finances, staff and technical expertise, and transport resources (boats, aircraft, trucks, etc.). Traditional bilateral donors (and other nondonor governments) possess these resources in great quantities and should be called upon to formally commit them to UNDRO and to immediately place them at UNDRO's disposal.

For example, the experts' panel report notes that a number of governments and private organizations have established stockpiles of relief supplies at various locations around the globe. Written agreements with these governments and organizations committing these resources to UNDRO on either a reimbursable or nonreimbursable basis would insure that UNDRO could immediately selectively call on these resources to speed relief where needed.

We believe that the United States, as the world's largest donor to disaster relief in recent years, will be in a good position to influence other nations toward these ends and that it should take the lead in advancing these proposals.

#### Strengthen predisaster planning

UNDRO will have to rely on donations to build itself up at least through 1977, at which time the funding method will be reviewed. UNDRO will also have to rely on the U.N. Development Program and on voluntary contributions to fund the wide range of potential technical assistance activities which it has identified in the preparedness and prevention areas.

In view of the funding situation, we believe UNDRO should first study these areas to identify highest priority activities and then emphasize those activities initially. To do otherwise could mean foregoing high-priority activities in one area in favor of lower priority activities in another, with loss of continuity in high-priority programs if sufficient funding is not available for a broad range of activities. However, once UNDRO has identified the full range of activities which should be undertaken and has quantified resource requirements not available to it to advance international predisaster planning, it should identify needs and requirements which might be available from other nations expert in this area. The United States should, if called upon, provide personnel or in other ways assist UNDRO in its preparedness endeavors.

## CHAPTER 5

### SCOPE OF REVIEW

We made a critical analysis of the worldwide response to the Sahel drought. We reviewed the manner in which most major donors provided and managed their relief programs and emphasized how these programs were coordinated by various U.N. agencies and bilateral donors.

We did our major work onsite in Sahel in November and December 1974. We observed port conditions for the relief effort in Dakar, Senegal, and in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and traced relief food through the distribution chain for Mauritania and Niger. This included observing the actual distribution to the people. We discussed the relief effort with representatives of several major donors, officials of U.N. agencies, local and national officials of the afflicted Sahel governments, and others. (See map showing locations visited by our audit team on p. 13.)

Work was also undertaken at the U.N. Disaster Relief Office and the League of International Red Cross Societies in Geneva, Switzerland; the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, Italy; and the Department of State and the Agency for International Development in Washington, D.C. In addition, we talked with representatives of the European Economic Community and the national governments of Canada, Germany, and France.