



Epidemics often result from catastrophic disasters. Above, a cholera-prevention campaign under way in a poor neighbourhood in Lima, Peru.

of such specific problems as the impact of tidal waves on the Maldives Islands, or the continued desertification of Egypt. Nor is the term "technical relief" limited to science. Medical expertise may be needed, for example, when assessing how to respond to an epidemic of cholera or other diseases in a refugee camp. Whether the disaster is caused by nature or human engineering, if it is an emergency, the chances are that UNDRO will be involved.

Early in 1991, there was a cholera outbreak in Peru. The Pan-American Health Organization shouldered the main responsibility for this emergency. At its request, UNDRO monitored the situation, relying on field assessments of the growing epidemic by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on-site representatives. Working closely together, UNDRO and UNDP readied emergency medical supplies and notified humanitarian agencies. As Michael Priestley, a senior UNDP disaster prevention expert, explained, UNDRO's role in such emergencies is pivotal.

"Disaster relief is a very difficult problem of logistical engineering", said Mr. Priestley. "UNDRO can fly in people into any situation . . . it's that type of instant response that's needed."

Both Messrs. Boullé and Priestley praised the special working relationship that exists between UNDRO and UNDP. "We do a lot with UNDRO because we provide technical assistance", Mr. Priestley explained. "We have been around for 40 years and we have contacts in 114 countries." When UNDRO was being organized, he added, "it was decided to have UNDP double up as the field representatives for UNDRO—our field representatives are theirs". Through this linkage, UNDRO, a relative newcomer by agency standards, gained an instant infrastructure that agencies with longer track records in the field take years to develop.

"While it's true that we are not the unit that brings the food and the water, we are the ones who make that happen", said Mr. Boullé. "We go in first to help the

Government assess the damage, or what is needed. We then pull out when the other agencies have had a chance to get themselves organized."

Typically, UNDRO will field the first phone calls regarding a developing disaster. The Office will then contact scientists, assess the potential damage and organize transportation to evacuate people if needed. It will also advise local voluntary organizations and other groups on how to respond, bring in technical experts, organize donations of food and other relief supplies, working closely with the affected countries to figure out which agency should do what in the specific emergency. The key for UNDRO is speed and efficiency.

As Mr. Boullé explained, 90 per cent of those who survive sudden natural disasters are found alive in the first 24 hours. He states:

"While immediate local response is always essential, outside help is often crucial. We have pledged in our office to respond to any request for assistance within 24 hours. And I think we have been recently quite successful in doing that very well."

The 'non-natural odds'

Despite its many successes, Mr. Boullé will be the first to admit that UNDRO is limited in its response for various reasons. First is its mandate, which stipulates that UNDRO can only act upon a governmental request for assistance. Hence, like other agencies with similar charters, UNDRO cannot help a country that does not want to be helped. The Office must respect UN security regulations, which sometimes means pulling out of areas deemed too dangerous by the UN.

A case in point is Liberia where civil war broke out in 1990, displacing thousands of civilians, resulting in widespread starvation and, tragically, civilian massacres by warring factions. UNDRO officials, upon

the Liberian Government's request, had been working in the country for six months prior to the outbreak of the conflict. Although many starving refugees needed food, supplies and medicine, UNDR0 had no choice but to leave when the orders came.

"There was nothing we or any other agency could do in that case, and that is of course very frustrating", admitted Mr. Boullé. As soon as the security situation allowed it, UNDR0 and other UN agencies returned to Liberia in October 1990.

A delicate diplomacy

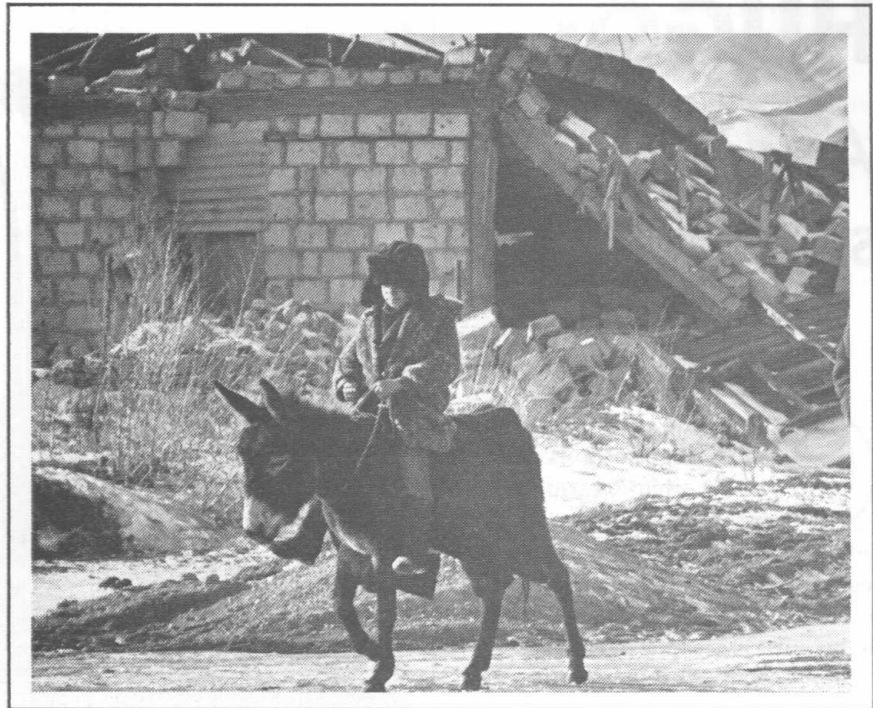
Another challenge for UNDR0 is the delicate task of saying "no" to well-intentioned donors or agencies.

In the case of the December 1988 earthquake in Armenia, for example, there was an extraordinary world response for help. Unfortunately, much of that came in the form of poorly-packed goods and clothing. Even after officials had stated that no additional donations were needed, contributions kept pouring in.

In the end, such help became what UNDR0 publicly termed "a disaster within a disaster". Clothing had to be fumigated; food spoiled and had to be discarded.

Still, UNDR0's claim to success in the financial area is based on hard numbers that show a twofold increase in in-cash and in-kind emergency assistance over the last biennium. Some \$40 million in contributions were channelled directly through UNDR0 for disaster relief during 1988 and 1989, versus \$22 million for the preceding biennium. In 1991, with \$63 million already raised for the Gulf crisis, those figures are likely to rise.

A central question facing all UN agencies is how that money is disbursed and, specifically, how much goes to salaries. Such queries do not make Mr. Boullé uncomfortable; quite the contrary.



Reuters/Bettman/F. Lenglaigne

An Armenian child and his father pause before the ruins of a house destroyed by the 1988 earthquake.

"Not one penny of donor contributions for specific disasters goes towards missions or salaries", he said. At present, only 3 per cent of disaster-specific donations go to support costs, as compared to the average 14 per cent charged by major international relief agencies.

UNDR0's budget for staff salaries, said Mr. Boullé, is divided at 50 per cent from the regular UN budget and 50 per cent from Member States' donations. UNDR0 is now actively working to strengthen its Trust Fund to pay for its expanding activities.

A third "sensitive area" is UNDR0's status as chief organizer for a plethora of relief organizations. Here, the issue is one Mr. Boullé calls the "question of efficiency". A blunt talker, he said: "Not all relief agencies are as effective or well organized, and this can be difficult." Among his tasks are determining competence and good organization, because these are the elements that make the difference in a crisis.

"People are not always happy about that", Mr. Boullé acknowledged. What helps is that UNDR0 is a direct office of the Secretary-General. "For that reason, UNDR0 has some muscle to make things happen", he explained.

Given its special authority, UNDR0 can also assume a role as a fulcrum for opinion on policy for the various NGOs it unites. "My sense is that they assess a situation and can make other UN agencies answerable to them", said Ms. Mullins, InterAction's coordinator. By comparison, she added: "None of these agencies are answerable to me."

Looking ahead, Mr. Boullé has good reason to feel optimistic as well as challenged. "Disaster relief is a growing field, and we are constantly learning and doing new things", he said. "With our resources and experience, we are in an excellent position to continue in our role." That also means, of course, that the phones at UNDR0 are not likely to stop ringing any time soon.