

UNDRO: Coping with disaster . . .

A fine line

From the moment political tensions began to escalate in the Persian Gulf area in August 1990, the phones began to ring constantly at the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO), which specializes in disaster-related matters. Although UNDRO was formed in 1971 chiefly to respond to sudden natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and typhoons, its mandate has been expanded to cover emergency "man-made" disasters.

"Our work symbolizes what many people have come to believe, which is that there is sometimes a fine line between a disaster caused by natural forces or human ones", said Philippe Boullé, Chief of the UNDRO New York office. What distinguishes UNDRO from any other UN or outside development agency "is that our focus is on the sudden disaster, rather than the slow-moving disaster, when there is a crisis and a need for an immediate response within 24 hours to avoid the loss of human lives".

In the case of the Gulf crisis, after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, hundreds of thousands of foreign workers from Egypt, India and elsewhere began scrambling for safe haven in Jordan, whose borders were left open on humanitarian grounds. Within days, however, Jordan found itself unable to cope with the huge influx of refugees from Iraq and Kuwait, and called on the international community for help.

UNDRO, a specialized office of the Secretary-General, immediately swung into action, coordinating air transport and repatriation of more than 700,000 persons—some 7,000 a day—back to their countries of

origin. UNDRO officials in Jordan oversaw the relief efforts of a diverse coalition of groups, including other UN organizations, the International Organization for Migration and the International Committee of the Red Cross and private non-governmental organizations. Within days of Jordan's cry for help, 40 flights a day were leaving Amman with relieved refugees.

In January, UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar designated UNDRO as the coordinator for the large-scale international response to evacuate more people from the zones of conflict. UNDRO contacted regional government officials and international agencies to put in place an emergency plan of action that allowed for the pre-positioning of relief supplies at safe border points in Iran,



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