World Disasters Report 1994

International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is one part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which comprises National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (the Federation), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The National Societies (161 at January 1994) exist in almost every country in the world (see section Three, part XI, for contacts). The Societies must fulfil stringent conditions to become recognised by the ICRC and to gain membership of the Federation. They must respect the seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (see inside back cover) and be recognised by their governments as voluntary aid societies which act as auxiliaries to the public authorities. National Societies provide a range of services, including emergency relief, health services and social assistance, to those most vulnerable and most in need. In war-time, they may act as auxiliaries to the army medical services, aid prisoners and refugees and provide a tracing service to help in putting people in touch with missing relatives.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is the permanent liaison body of the National Societies and acts as their representative internationally. The Federation organises and coordinates international disaster response in support of the actions of the affected National Societies. It encourages the creation of new National Societies and assists them in developing their structures and programmes. The Federation Secretariat in Geneva is staffed by more than 245 people of some 30 different nationalities.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is a private non-political independent institution. It acts as a neutral intermediary in humanitarian matters during international conflicts, civil wars and internal disturbances. It provides protection and assistance to both military and civilian victims.

ICRC's role during armed conflict is defined by the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977. At all times ICRC promotes the development and worldwide dissemination of these treaties. ICRC has its headquarters in Geneva where it employs more than 690 staff supporting assistance operations around the world.

The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters

The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) was established in 1973 at the University of Louvain's School of Public Health in Brussels with the cooperation of the government of Belgium.

CRED aims to: strengthen human and community researches by developing and implementing training programmes for health personnel at regional, national and international levels; research the human impact of disasters and relief; develop appropriate tools for health management in disasters; develop and run information systems and computer databases; and provide documentation and information services.

Training courses are given at the centre, including the regular international course on health and disasters, and in other countries, focusing on preparedness and training for decision makers. Specialised training and individual fellowships are arranged in Brussels. CRED undertakes both basic epidemiological research and field research. Issues of the development effects of disasters, disaster-related risk factors for morbidity and mortality, and long-term policies for international relief are of special interest.

Beside its independent activities, CRED works closely with several international and non-governmental agencies. In particular, it has strong collaborative links with the Federation, providing technical and scientific support to its activities as appropriate. It is a World Health Organization collaborating centre and has expanded its support of the WHO global programme for emergency preparedness and response, and increased its international collaboration to promote the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. Participating as a core partner in the International Emergency Response and Readiness Information System, it works closely with the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

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For further copies of the *World Disasters Report 1994* and forthcoming annual editions (available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic) please contact the publishers, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies or your National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. (See Section III, part XVI for contact details)

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Introduction

Setting standards for ourselves; asking questions of others

Disasters are not unusual, extraordinary or infrequent occurrences affecting a few thousand people on the other side of the world who are soon back on their feet with a little international assistance.

Today's disasters are a frequent part of the lives - and deaths - of hundreds of millions of people across the world, from Somalia to Los Angeles, and their impact cannot be brushed aside: US$ 30 billion for a few seconds of earthquake, 250,000 children dead in a year of hunger in Africa. Disasters have a powerful and growing effect on our world, its economies and its security, from the complex conflicts of Europe to the survival of slum-dwellers living next to a leaking chemical plant whose risks are kept secret from the very people who need that information most.

As the challenges facing disaster response agencies and local threatened communities are greater than even before, the World Disasters Report 1994 *picks up on many of the issue first explored in the report's launch edition in 1993.*

Disasters are constantly changing, affecting more people, seeking out those already vulnerable and destroying their abilities to survive and prosper. Some of the biggest and fastest changes in disasters have been in the geography of such complex crises: where they happen, and thus who they affect and how. In the very few years since the end of the cold war, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the war in former Yugoslavia and escalating economic uncertainties in eastern Europe, the traditional Asian and African focus of international disaster response has swung sharply from the "south" to the "north"

For many agencies, including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, this has meant a massive shift in the balance of relief resources since 1990 away from Africa and the Indian sub-continent and towards Europe and the newly-independent states. Thankfully, resources devoted to longer term development are still targeted firmly on the developing nations. These resources, raised from Federation appeals which in 1993 totalled almost half a billion Swiss Francs, reflect a scale and diversity of needs not seen since the Red Cross was the biggest agency operating in Europe just after the second world war.

More worrying still is the pervasive nature of today's disasters in the north. In India's floods or famine in the Sahel, emergency relief at the height of a disaster is usually delivered to around 10% of the population. In parts of the Caucasus or the Balkans, however, up to 40% of a country's population may be in need of assistance.

When relief is needed on this scale, short-term rescue solutions are to no avail and humanitarian agencies, particularly international non-governmental organisations, can never hope to contain - let alone eliminate - such levels of suffering This puts humanitarian agencies in a quandary: when assistance turns into full-time structural support, how should we work to ensure we are effective, and how much should we expect and demand of governments and the United Nations ?

Alongside this geographical shift has come an increase in the complexity of disasters, or at least an increase in our understanding of their complexity. Today there are hardly any so-called "natural" disasters.

All the famines in Africa in the past decade have involved civil wars as well as drought In the Caucasus, a combination of economic collapse, war and harsh weather

is causing massive suffering to hundreds of thousands of displaced people and refugees. As violence - from banditry to all-out civil war - is on the increase, with innocent civilians caught in the middle or specifically targeted, the same story is repeated in Afghanistan, Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia.

Exploring this complexity, Section Two of the World Disasters Report 1994 *examines the crisis of former Yugoslavia, economic decline in the Caucasus, the growing food scarcity threat in north-east Brazil, and the myths and reality of disasters in India's major earthquake in 1993. It also finds positive signs amid disaster, from the staggering success of drought relief in Southern Africa to the surprising economic recovery in Somalia.*

Behind the changing face of disasters is a growing understanding by the Federation and many other humanitarian agencies that a driving force for much of the suffering to which they respond is the abuse of power in the relationships between people.

This raises a range of new questions for governments and the United Nations. how should people's lives be protected and rights guaranteed in disasters, what can be done to ensure those threatened by crisis have the information they need to cope with or even prevent disasters, and when will steps be taken to increase the assistance to civilians in conflict ?

In Section One of the World Disasters Report 1994, *these crucial issues are investigated in detail, from the secrets that kill people in disasters and the information that saves lives to the global risks to civilians from the 100 million anti-personnel mines scattered across the world and the new controls that could be enforced on the export and indiscriminate use of mines*

At the same time, there is a heavy responsibility on humanitarian agencies to improve and safeguard the way they work with people in need, including the need to listen to indigenous communities, which frequently have a deep understanding of the crisis they face and knowledge of the options for mitigating their disasters.

The Federation is well aware that in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, aid agencies can be all-powerful, so getting those power relationships with local people and communities right is a critical issue Assisting can easily become insisting, and relief can be imposed and driven by other than purely humanitarian objectives.

That is why the Federation and seven other major international disaster-response organisations have drawn up a voluntary code of conduct setting out minimum standards which should be expected of relief agencies and which will take into full account the needs of people affected by disasters.

In Section One of the World Disasters Report 1994, *the code of conduct is set out for the first time, alongside an assessment of the potential to avoid imposing aid and instead to build the real partnerships between agencies and beneficiaries that can deliver the complementary assistance people need to add to their own resources to resist disasters, survive crisis and prosper in the future.*

With more than a billion people living in poverty, up to a quarter of a billion people affected annually by disasters and some 10 million additional people joining the number of those affected each year, disaster response has little chance of being a declining industry.But in a "market" where demand increases faster than the resources available for humanitarian agencies to appease it, the need to protect the rights of individuals caught up in disasters, and to set and improve professional standards for those seeking to provide assistance must be paramount.

These issues, needs and rights must guide the principles and practices of humanitarian agencies and those who work for them. We know it is not somebody else's problem, it is our problem, one that every individual involved in humanitarian assistance must play a role in redressing

George Weber
Secretary General