

# the Scope of the **Challenge**

The world has experienced three times as many great natural disasters in the 1990s as in the 1960s—while emergency aid funds have declined by 40 per cent in the past five years alone, according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

In the Caribbean, Hurricanes George and Mitch killed more than 13,000 in 1998, with Mitch being the deadliest Atlantic storm in 200 years. A much less publicized June cyclone in India caused damage comparable to Mitch and an estimated 10,000 deaths.

Major floods hit Bangladesh, India, Nepal and much of East Asia, with thousands killed. Two thirds of Bangladesh was inundated for months, making millions homeless. More than 3,000 died in China's catastrophic Yangtze flood, millions were displaced, and the financial cost is estimated to have been an astonishing \$30 billion. Fires ravaged tens of thousands of square kilometres of forest in Brazil, Indonesia and Siberia, with devastating consequences for human health and local economies. In Afghanistan, earthquakes killed more than 9,000 people. In August this year, Turkey suffered one of the most devastating earth-

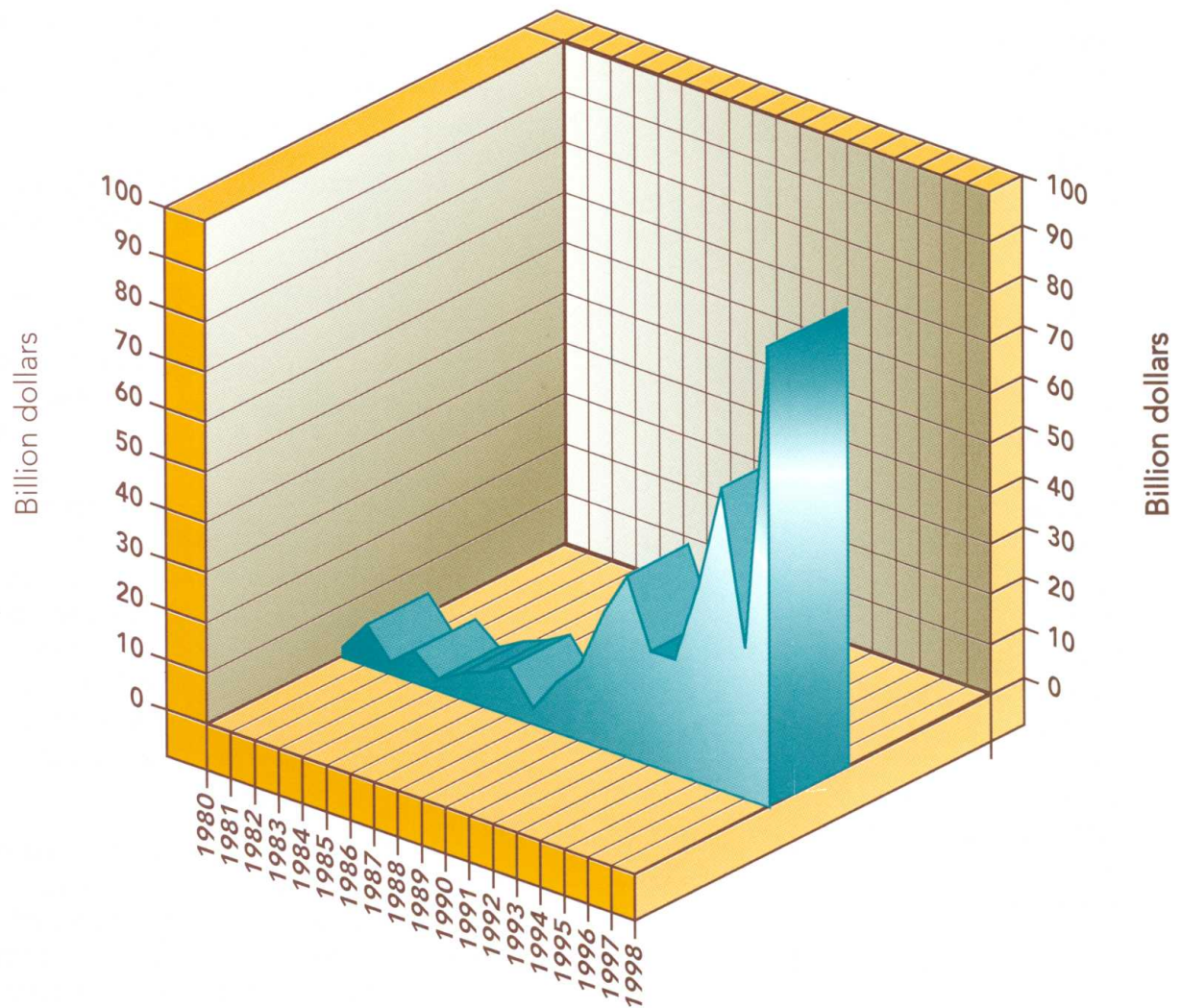
quakes in recent history.

In terms of violent conflicts, the most worrying development in 1998 was a significant increase in the number of wars. This is particularly troubling because the incidence and severity of global warfare had been declining since 1992—by a third or more, according to some researchers.

The humanitarian challenge is heightened by the fact that the international community does not respond in a consistent way to humanitarian emergencies. Media attention is part of the problem. The crisis in Kosovo, for example, received saturation coverage. The more protracted and deadly war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the resumption of Angola's savage civil war, received very little. Other wars went almost entirely unreported. Partly for that reason, responses to appeals for humanitarian and security assistance have been similarly skewed. It is my strong view that such assistance should not be allocated on the basis of media coverage, politics or geography. Its sole criterion should be human need.

I am particularly alarmed by the international community's poor response to the needs of victims of war and natural disasters in Africa. Where needs are pressing, if we are not true to our most basic principles of multilateralism and humanitarian ethics, we will be accused of inconsistency at best, hypocrisy at worst.

## Worldwide Economic Losses from Weather-related Natural Disasters



Source:  
Worldwatch Institute (1999).