



Facing the Humanitarian Challenge

Towards a **Culture of Prevention**

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Introduction

Confronting the horrors of war and natural disasters, the United Nations has long argued that prevention is better than cure; that we must address root causes, not merely their symptoms. But aspiration has yet to be matched by effective action. As a consequence, the international community today confronts unprecedented humanitarian challenges.

The year 1998 was the worst on record for weather-related natural disasters. Floods and storms killed tens of thousands of people worldwide and displaced millions more. When the victims of earthquakes are included, some 50,000 lives were lost last year to natural disasters. Meanwhile, what had seemed a gradual but hopeful trend towards a world with fewer and less deadly wars may have halted. Armed conflicts broke out or re-erupted in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Kashmir and Kosovo, and between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Other long-established wars, notably that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, ground on largely unreported by the global media. Moreover, the impact of wars on civilians has worsened because internal wars, now the most

frequent type of armed conflict, typically take a heavier toll on civilians than inter-State wars, and because combatants increasingly have made targeting civilians a strategic objective. This brutal disregard for humanitarian norms—as well as the Geneva Conventions on the rules of war, the fiftieth anniversary of which we recently commemorated—also extends to treatment of humanitarian workers, who are all too frequently denied access to victims in conflict zones or are themselves attacked.

Confronted with renewed armed conflict and the rapidly escalating human and financial costs of natural disasters, our task is twofold. We must strengthen our capacity to bring relief to victims, but we must also devise more effective strategies to prevent emergencies from arising in the first place. The case for better and more cost-effective prevention strategies is my central theme in this report.