

DISASTER-RELATED TERMINOLOGY

O.A. Sperandio

In the multiple and complex activities associated with disaster preparedness and emergency management a number of terms and expressions have entered into common usage. As background information for the Regional Workshop on Environmental Health Management in Emergencies a list of terms and expressions has been prepared. This list is based mostly on a Disaster Thesaurus used by the Pan American Health Organization [1] and on information available in UNDRO - Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator - publications [2, 3].

Armed conflicts: War-related problems including small-scale and international involvements.

Aseismic structure: A building, bridge, water treatment plant or other structure which is designed and built following strictly aseismic regulations and using special materials which will prevent or minimize the effect of earthquakes.

Avalanche: Destructive movements of ice or snow.

Biological disaster: Accidental or warfare release of harmful biological products.

Chemical accident: Chemical pollution originated by spills from transport accidents or other accidental release of chemical substances.

Damage assessment: Post-impact estimation of physical damages translating into financial losses and needs for relief.

Disaster: An event, natural or man-made which is concentrated in time and space and which causes physical damage and has destructive effect on man's normal activities. An episode which may later call for rehabilitation and reconstruction measures.

Disaster legislation: Laws and regulations instituted to mitigate the damaging effects of a disaster, principally in the field of physical and urban planning, public works and building construction.

Disaster plan - local: A written plan of action for a state, local community, schools, hotels and other public or private facilities delineating roles and responsibilities of individuals and evacuation procedures for effective action during an emergency.

Disaster plan - national: A written plan of action applicable at the national level delineating roles and responsibilities of governmental organizations for dealing with a disaster. The plan may involve the private sector and voluntary organizations as well.

Drought: Insufficient levels of rain resulting in water shortage affecting the economic and physical wellbeing of the communities in a region.

Earthquake: Sudden shift of land areas along fault lines causing massive physical destruction affecting a population.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT IN EMERGENCIES

Elements at risk: Means the population, buildings and civil engineering works, economic activities, public services, utilities and infrastructure etc. at risk in a given area.

Evacuation management: Removal of injured people from disaster site to appropriate centres of care and removal of dead. Includes operations to evacuate a disaster prone area before a disaster hits (hurricanes).

Floods: Events that may be caused by excessive rainfall, collapse of the walls of a reservoir or the embankment of a river.

Industrial accidents: Disasters caused by industry, such as dumping of industrial wastes and accidental leaks and spills.

Landslide: Soil movements which may cause damages, loss of property and casualties.

Man-made disasters: Disasters which may result from man's activities. Can be accidental such as oil spills, transport accidents, air and water pollution and radiation accidents or deliberate acts such as war, civil strife and riot.

Mitigation: Mitigation means reducing the actual or probable effect of an extreme hazard on man and his environment. It is, in effect, prevention to a degree.

Natural disasters: Disasters which are the result of external forces of nature (earthquakes, tropical storms, floods, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, droughts).

Natural hazard: Probability of occurrence, within a specific period of time in a given area, of a potentially damaging natural phenomenon.

Nuclear accident: Accidental release of radiation by nuclear power plants, or failures in the control/storage of radioactive materials.

Oil spill: An event which is caused by accidental release of oil and causes water and/or soil pollution.

Preparedness: Action designed to minimize loss of life and damage, and to organize and facilitate timely and effective rescue, relief and rehabilitation in cases of disasters. Preparedness includes forecasting and warning, education and training of the population, organization for and management of disasters.

Prevention: Measures designed to prevent natural phenomena from causing or resulting in disaster or other related emergency situations. Prevention includes legislation and regulatory measures, principally in the fields of physical and urban planning, public works and building.

Public awareness: Strategies developed to educate communities about methods that can be adopted to minimize disaster and emergency hazards to human life and property.

Risk: The expected number of lives lost, persons injured, damage to property and disruption of economic activity due to a particular disaster episode.

Refugee: Person fearing persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion mostly outside the country of nationality and unable to return. Person involved in mass exodus of people for reasons of conflict or natural disaster.

Refugee camps: A temporary settlement occupied by refugees.

Rehabilitation, disaster: Provision of services and facilities which will restore the population's former living standards and structures to encourage adjustments to the changes caused by the disaster.

Resettlement: Settlement of displaced persons or refugees in a geographic region separate from their previous place of residence.

Search and rescue: Techniques and strategies for locating and rescuing victims of disaster.

Severe local storms: Dangerous meteorological phenomena that normally have a relatively short life cycle and affect small areas (tornadoes, thunderstorms, lightning and hail).

Simulation exercise: Use of disaster drills and classroom problem-solving in order to simulate a disaster situation to promote more effective coordination of response from various individuals, agencies and organizations during a disaster.

Temporary housing: Temporary shelter for victims of disaster (displaced persons).

Tidal wave: Natural phenomena associated with hurricanes, cyclones and other causes excluding earthquakes.

Tornado: Natural phenomena associated with whirlwind; strong convection of air near the ground.

Tropical cyclones: Tropical cyclones (or typhoons or hurricanes) are small, intense depressions that can occur in tropical latitudes. They are formed over the open sea and usually move towards land. In some case several countries may be affected.

Tsunami: Tidal wave of seismic origin.

Volcano eruption: Volcanic explosion with production of lava and/or ash causing harm to environment and population.

Vulnerability: The degree of loss to a given element at risk or set of such elements resulting from the occurrence of a natural phenomenon of a given magnitude and expressed on a scale from 0 (no damage) to 1 (total loss).

Vulnerability analysis: Studies analysing the probabilities of disaster striking and effects of different actions taken in terms of morbidity/mortality and physical damage outcomes.

REFERENCES

- [1] Pan American Health Organization, Disaster preparedness update: a computerized index of an emergency preparedness and disaster relief bibliography, Washington, Pan American Health Organization.
- [2] United Nations, Office of the Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, Disaster prevention and mitigation - A compendium of current knowledge: preparedness aspects, Geneva, United Nations, 1984, 217 p. (Disaster prevention and mitigation series; volume 11).
- [3] United Nations, Office of the Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, Disaster prevention and mitigation - A compendium of current knowledge: sanitation aspects, New York, United Nations, 1982. 76 p. (Disaster prevention and mitigation series; volume 8).