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A world of calamities

There has probably never been a single day in human history without some community, somewhere in the world, either suffering a natural or man-made calamity or picking up the pieces after such a disaster. But only in recent decades have those calamities been so vividly transmitted into the homes of millions of television viewers. That same medium encourages the viewers to judge the speed and effectiveness with which local and international services respond to disasters.

The very fact that millions of viewers, and readers of the press, are critically aware of disasters virtually as they happen, and of the response to them, has given emergency-related activities a much greater political dimension than they ever had in the past.

In just one decade, between 1978 and 1988, disasters affected more than 420 million people and killed well over one million. An estimated 40 million people even now are refugees or displaced persons driven from their homes as a consequence of disasters. The World Health Organization (WHO) has a clear mandate to do everything in its power to mitigate the health consequences of emergencies, wherever they occur. Its concern is Health for All, whatever the age, gender or status of the victims.

More vulnerable

Today, on the brink of the 21st century, a vast range of demographic, ecological and technological conditions are making many communities more vulnerable than ever before to the impact of natural and man-made disasters. Scientific advances have certainly helped to ease the impact of some emergencies. Meteorological satellites give advance warning of oncoming cyclones, city buildings can now be constructed to withstand almost every scale of earthquake, and new vaccines help to control the spread of disease in the aftermath of catastrophes.

Nevertheless, the size, number and complexity of major emergencies still continue to grow, and many of them have their roots in political, economic and social situations. So today, over and

above such natural calamities as the earthquakes, cyclones, floods and volcanic eruptions that have plagued mankind throughout history, must now be added the ill-effects of the misuse of science and technology.

Pollution may take many forms, such as the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India where a leak of poisonous gas killed more than 2,800 local residents, or the 1986 fire at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in the USSR which released a radioactive cloud across large areas of Europe. But

Famine victims
in Africa; survivors
lack the energy to
bury their dead.

