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The role of WHO in Emergency Management

WHO operates at the request of its Member States and in partnership with the international community, including other UN bodies, donor agencies, NGOs and governments, to prepare for and respond to disasters whenever and wherever they occur. Besides coordinating the international community's efforts to assist national health services before, during and after emergencies, so as to alleviate the impact of disasters on health, WHO seeks to encourage self-reliance and national development in Member States by increasing their capacity to manage emergencies of all kinds.

Humanitarian assistance has to be tailored to each country's particular needs in the short and long term. More and more, the international community is recognizing that disaster relief goes beyond a brief, intensive influx of food, medicine and technical assistance. Relief *must* be integrated into long-term plans for health and social development. This was underlined by the UN General Assembly's Resolution 46/182 in 1991, which stated that "there is a clear link between emergency, rehabilitation and development ... Humanitarian assistance should be accompanied by a renewal of

commitment to economic growth and sustainable development of developing countries."

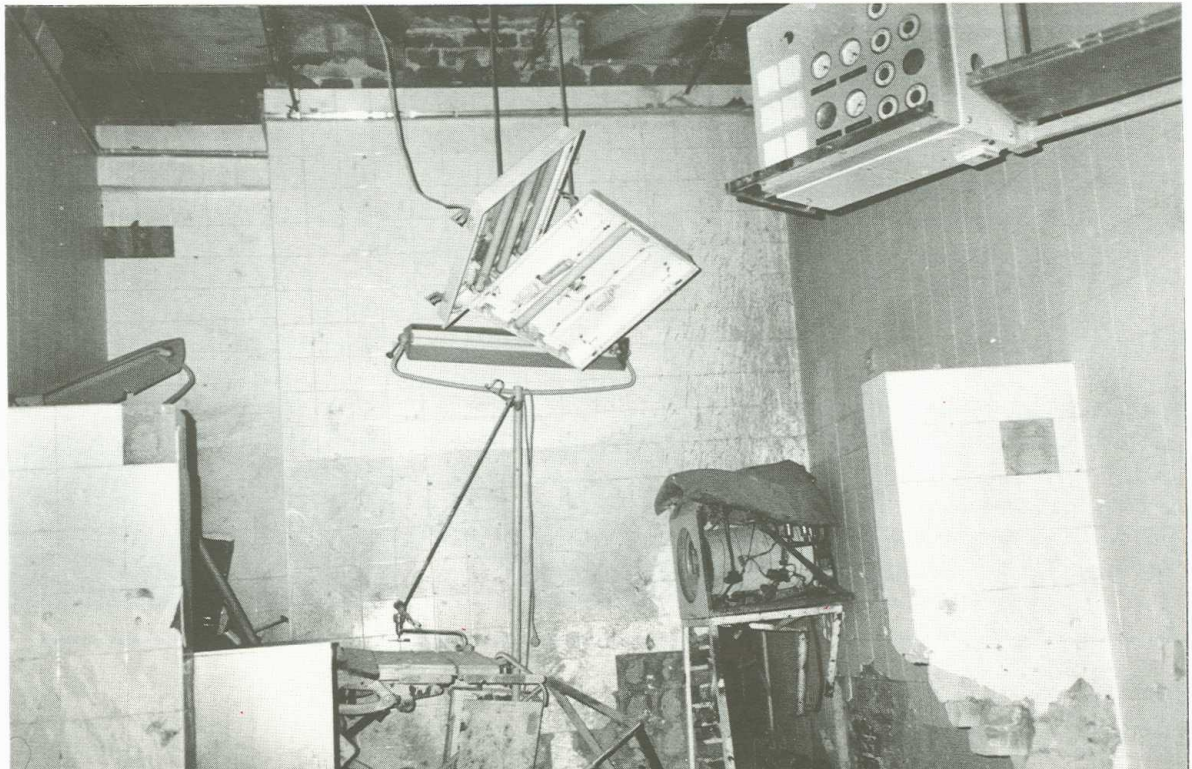
This is why WHO encourages countries to include disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness measures in their mid-term and long-term development plans, rather than assuming that emergency aid will be "parachuted in" as short-term relief. Every dollar intended for relief is allocated with development in mind.

WHO has decades of experience in working with national health authorities to develop preparedness measures that reduce the impact of disasters on health and health services. Its many technical programmes – such as communicable diseases, immunization, water and sanitation, mental health and essential drugs – have incorporated emergency preparedness elements in their activities in member countries.

Expansion and restructuration

WHO formally established an emergency unit in 1974 to coordinate the technical work of other programmes for preparedness activities at country level. In the 1980s, when natural catastrophes,

Remains of
a clinic in Bosnia;
warfare undermines
the very
infrastructure of
health.





WHO/PAHOU, Vizcarra

technological disasters and political conflicts increased in numbers and scale, the member countries called on WHO to tackle disaster relief as well. Consequently, an expanded Division of Emergency Relief Operations (ERO) was formed in 1989.

Originally focused on the relief and rehabilitation issues facing Afghanistan, Namibia and the Arab Occupied Territories in the Middle East, this new relief arm quickly expanded its emergency relief operations to such troubled areas as Angola, Cambodia, the Gulf region, the Horn of Africa, Lebanon, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, former Yugoslavia, some of the former Soviet republics and elsewhere.

In order to better meet the challenges of humanitarian assistance in the 1990s and beyond, WHO recently took stock of its performance in emergencies and restructured the operations of the Emergency Relief Operations Division (ERO). The Division was divided into three major areas in

January 1992 to meet new international developments in humanitarian assistance. These areas are:

- **Emergency Preparedness and Planning**, a global programme with the task of strengthening the preparedness and mitigation capacities of emergency-vulnerable countries;
- **Emergency Response**, which divides its activities into three geographic zones – Africa and the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, and Asia and the Pacific – to ensure more efficient management of emergency relief;
- **Emergency Information System** – another global programme, charged with creating a new information network for rapid, efficient communication of information in emergencies.

Specifically, WHO's emergency management programmes coordinate health policies and infrastructure development so as to address a whole

Firemen undergo
a realistic training
exercise in disaster
management
in Mexico.



PAHO

Relief workers
waste precious
time in sorting
inappropriate or
inadequately
labelled drugs
following an
emergency in
Latin America.

range of aspects, such as national economic planning, first aid, nutrition, water and sanitation, mental health, routine medical care, health legislation, epidemic disease control, immunization and environmental health.

ERO can draw upon the vast scientific and technical resources of WHO's 25 divisions and nearly 100 technical programmes (at Headquarters, in Regions and in country offices), as well as over 1,100 scientific and technical institutions linked to WHO as collaborating centres.

At the regional level, WHO has six regional offices with focal points for emergency issues. These are in Alexandria, Brazzaville, Copenhagen, Manila, New Delhi and Washington D.C. The Pan-African Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response, in Addis Ababa, is dedicated entirely to servicing disaster-vulnerable areas in that continent, and a feasibility study is under way for a similar Asia-Pacific Centre.

At the national level, the offices of WHO country representatives (WRs) are the focal points for undertaking emergency activities. They provide government ministries (usually, but not always, the Ministry of Health) with technical advice, emergency funds, supplies and training. As well as national development plans and capabilities, they take into account the in-country expertise of academic institutes, NGOs and private firms.

At the global level, ERO coordinates policy planning within WHO emergency health activities. It does so with the support of other WHO programmes, and in collaboration with other UN agencies and related organizations. Ten collaborating centres, specialized in emergency management, provide technical expertise, training and research for WHO emergency management programmes.

Let us now look in more details at those three areas of action. □

Facing page:
Huge quantities of
grain need to be
safely stockpiled
in vulnerable parts
of Africa.