

# When Journalists Join Humanitarian Efforts

## The Federation's Example

by Helge Kvam\*

In November 1996, when hundreds of thousands of people returned to Rwanda from eastern Zaire, journalists from all over the world rushed to Gisenyi.

On the outskirts of Kigali, a Children's Home run by the Belgian Red Cross in Kiciyru sheltered in two days more than 900 children who had been separated from their parents during the exodus from eastern Zaire. The Home was built to house 200 children only. Sheltering and feeding them was the first step. But those children also had to find their lost families. Joining a Red Cross team, a group of journalists travelled with some of them all the way back to their home villages and witnessed their reunification with their families.

*"We arranged for journalists to see the Children's Home. They were able to talk with some of the children and see the work being done there," says Michael Bech, one of the two Danish Information Officers sent to Rwanda to work with the newly-developed Federation's Emergency Response Unit. Food, medicine and vaccines were distributed. Reuniting the children with their parents was one of the top priorities. With assistance from the Emergency Response team, some journalists joined the Red Cross staff when 146 children were driven down to their home villages to try and find their families. One hundred and twenty five children found their parents.*

*"We provide the journalists with information and contacts. Then we let them do their work. We cannot - and should not - interfere with the way they tell their stories," says Michael Bech, "but we can help them write their stories and they in turn can help us*



UNICEF/B. Press

*in tracing displaced people and reunifying them with their families."*

This was the first time the information unit of the Emergency Response Unit was sent to the field. It was a rewarding experience.

*"We work with the support of the Federation's delegation operating in the field. In order to be able to provide accurate first hand information to the press, we need to know exactly what is happening in the area and be briefed about the Red Cross activities there," says Michael Bech.*

However, one of the basic rules of the Emergency Response Unit is that it should, like all the other units, be able to work on its own without interfering with the delegation. Therefore, each unit is self-sufficiently equipped with communication sets.

*"We are doing a great job and we want to be open about it. We have nothing to hide and why*

Danish Red Cross



*Being there when it happens*

*shouldn't we be open towards the public and the donors about how we spend the money?"* says Randi Bjerre, Head of the delegate section at the Danish Red Cross. Randi is responsible for recruiting staff for ERU's information unit. Recruitment of staff is a key issue within ERU. Without the right people, the best equipment is worth nothing. One of the priorities is that they must be ready to be sent to the field with very short notice.

*"The Danish Red Cross called me and asked if I could be at the airport within two hours. I was ready to take off,"* says Michael Bech. All those trained to participate in ERU's information section are professional journalists. The International Federation considers the two-week mission to Rwanda to have been successful even if some improvements are needed such as in the field of technical training. It has highlighted the

### ERU in a Few Lines

Some 25 Emergency Response Units consisting of telecommunications, information, logistics, water and sanitation, referral hospital and basic health care are ready to be sent to the field immediately following an emergency situation. The teams are staffed with trained people who are able to work independently from the existing delegation and are supposed to stay on site for two or three weeks before being integrated into the delegation. Apart from the information unit mentioned in this article, several basic health care, water and sanitation units have been deployed into the Great Lakes Area recently.

positive collaboration between the journalists and relief workers. It has proved that the press, beyond its initial role, has also a part to play in the success of a humanitarian mission.

*"You cannot know when and where exactly an earthquake, a flood or a mass movement of refugees is going to take place but we have, through the Emergency Response Unit, created a structure ready for immediate take off whenever disaster strikes anywhere in the world,"* says Jurgen Weyand. Head of the Federation's Operations Support Service, Jurgen has on numerous occasions expressed strong views about the benefits for a relief team to work closely with journalists in the field.

*\*Helge Kvam is Information Officer, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.*

# Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance

## The Role of Information

by Sharon Rusu\*

In order to assist the humanitarian community in responding more effectively to complex emergencies, the provision of timely and reliable information is central to the coordinating role of the DHA. According to its mandate, DHA's responsibilities in this regard include the provision of consolidated information, including early warning on emergencies, to all interested governments and authorities concerned, particularly affected and disaster-prone countries, drawing on the capacities of the organizations of the system and other available sources (A/RES/46/182, 19 December 1991).

To carry out these tasks, DHA should act as a central clearing-house for the dissemination of information that derives from operational agencies and other relevant sources and ranges from early warning through tactical/logistical information to policy analysis. DHA should ensure that such information is rapidly disseminated to all major actors including the United Nations, NGOs, media and donors. In current practice, however, information pertinent to decision-making is often delayed in reaching those who take decisions. The reasons for such delays are often the result of information overload and/or unclear or unwieldy dissemination practices. The result is often "too little, too late", a phenomenon increasingly in evidence as new technologies increase outputs but do little to make essential information avail-

able in manageable ways to those who need it most.

In order to ensure the provision of relevant and trustworthy information that supports the effective coordination of humanitarian assistance, DHA has developed three information systems. They are: HEWS (Humanitarian Early Warning System), IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Network currently for the Great Lakes region but with IRIN West Africa planned for 1997) and ReliefWeb. Taken together, they represent a model for an integrated approach in the management of information for emergency preparedness and response. They offer the decision maker tremendous value-added in three interdependent ways: HEWS provides warnings as to potential "hot spots"; IRIN's daily situation reports afford cogent analyses of the emergency in the Great Lakes region and ReliefWeb, with its twice daily publishing capacity on the Internet, allows for the rapid dissemination of this information, and connections to other relevant sources, to a worldwide humanitarian community.

Relating directly to the strengthening of DHA's role in the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations, the elaboration of this integrated information management model comprising three components, early warning, analysis and dissemination, is central to the Department's planning for 1997 and beyond. Based on the

model, the idea is to develop an information management approach that allows for the seamless flow of information to a wide range of actors. With this model, information is packaged to user requirements in order to facilitate ease of access and consumption and the system itself has the potential to expand and contract as needs change, allowing for a more focused, targeted and cost-effective approach to information management.

Ensuring the availability of trustworthy information is strategic to the effective coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance. If DHA is to undertake responsibility for this central role, it requires support from the United Nations system and donors to develop fully an integrated and targeted approach to information management. Such an approach should necessarily draw on existing capabilities within the current system and strengthen the capacity of emergency-prone countries to receive, use and disseminate such information as is produced. Finally, such an approach should strive to fill existing information gaps at the inter-agency level as well as to provide a reliable and timely information base for policy discussions at the highest levels within the United Nations system.

---

\*Sharon Rusu is Head, Information Services, (IMERB) DHA.

# What's New on the Bookshelf . . .

## Mudflows: Learning from the Management of Major Disasters\*

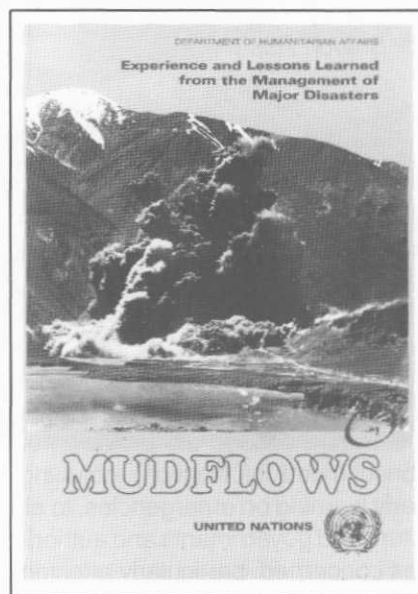
A mudflow is a process in which gravel, boulders and rocks, mixed with clay and water, move readily, almost like a liquid, down a slope.

As much as 20 per cent of the world's population live and work in areas prone to frequent mudflows, including those which may be a consequence of earthquakes, heavy rains, or volcanic eruptions. Can mudflows be avoided? This may not be possible. However, the losses and suffering they inflict can be reduced significantly.

"Mudflows: Experience and Lessons Learned from the Management of Major Disasters" is the title of a new DHA publication, with contributions from governmental authorities, international organizations, NGOs

and technical bodies from the management of natural disasters. This project was supported by the Government of Switzerland and Japan. The target audience is technical personnel of government and private research institutes dealing with technical aspects of mudflow preparedness and prevention, as well as United Nations agencies and NGOs. This study should help mobilize public opinion and initiate measures to assess such hazards, to prepare for them and to provide the facilities and capabilities required for emergency relief when such disaster strikes.

\*A DHA publication prepared in support of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. 140 p. ISBN 92-1-132020-8. Sales No: E.96.III.M.I. 1996.



## Legal Aspects of Natural Disaster Prevention\*

### *The Use of Economic Instruments for the Prevention of Natural Disasters*

This first part of a study published by the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction addresses the issue of introducing the necessary regulatory provisions in the practices currently followed by financial institutions and other economic actors in providing loans, grants and incentives (or disincentives) for housing and business development purposes with a view to promoting natural disaster prevention. The second part, to be published at a later stage, will deal with the specific legal aspects of land use, physical planning and building codes and their implementation as well as

"structural" prevention measures in general.

It is directed primarily to non-specialist policy-makers in law and public administration, who in the discharge of their normal functions may be called upon to devise schemes to reduce the impact of natural disasters. It is intended to give an insight into how carefully aimed economic instruments can contribute to natural disaster prevention.

Financial instruments, such as mortgage policies, loans and subsidies and other economic incentives for housing purposes or the creation of enterprises as well as insurance

can indeed be powerful incentives - or deterrents - if they are systematically applied to the prevention of natural disasters. The study aims at showing how the most basic preventive measures - such as the selection of the most appropriate sites for specific activities or the protection of human settlements - can be promoted in a decisive way by the use of these instruments.

\*Published by the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, October 1996.