

The Feasibility of Prehospital Medical Response Teams for Foreign Disaster Assistance

Terry Abrams, BA, EMT-P

Introduction

Disasters are defined as events caused either by natural or technological occurrences, that overwhelm the resources that are immediately available to manage or mitigate the impact of the event.¹ Disasters, by their very nature, are newsmakers. With the improvement in telecommunications, the barriers of distance are reduced to the extent that the people of the world all are members of what Marshall MacLuhan called the "global village." It now is a common practice to watch the effects of a disaster on the other side of the world, from the safety and comfort of the living room, live on television. The capacity to empathize with the victims, and to feel almost a part of the incident, results in tremendous public attention and an urging of governments, not directly affected by the event, to get involved and "do something!"²

Should prehospital medical response teams be formed for deployment to selected foreign disasters? Since the Mexico earthquakes of 1985, this question has been asked more and more frequently. Governments at all levels are being asked about it with increasing passion, particularly when disasters occur close to "home." In this author's opinion, prehospital, medically-oriented, disaster response teams should not be formed if their primary purpose is an international response. There are many reasons for this position. They can be broken down into several considerations:

- a) *Political*—at the municipal, provincial, state, federal, and international levels;
- b) *Training*—initial requirements as well as ongoing maintenance training;
- c) *Economic*—costs of formation, training, personnel, equipment, etc.; and
- d) *Effectiveness*—ability to respond quickly and accomplish the mission.

Political Considerations

The Armenian Earthquake of December 1988, in many ways, was a political event as well as a disaster. There was great pressure from the media and the general public to respond to so devastating an occurrence, especially with its timing so close to Christmas. Further, there was a perceived opportunity for the Western countries to respond to the Soviet Union; particularly in light of Glastnost, the loosening up of the Soviet relationship with the West. Accompanying a need for a response by United States teams,³⁻⁵ there was a similar push in Canada—a response at the insistence of essentially ad hoc rescue teams, most notably in the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.⁶⁻⁸

A seven-member team of medics and firefighters from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, arrived at the scene of the disaster almost ten days following the

Staff Development and Technical Services Division, Calgary EMS Department, P.O. Box 2100, Station M, Calgary, Alberta Canada T2P2M5