

UNHCR'S EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Ensuring effective emergency preparedness and response has been a major priority for UNHCR throughout the past decade. In 1991, UNHCR witnessed a sudden and dramatic exodus of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees from Iraq to Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In light of that experience, the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section (EPRS) was established in 1991 and has since acted as the Office's focal point for the development and maintenance of emergency preparedness and response mechanisms that are crucial to an effective management of refugee emergencies. UNHCR's overall objective of maintaining a strong emergency preparedness and response capacity is to ensure that the Office is able to respond effectively to any emergency globally without delay, in situations where existing capacity is unable to cope or where there is no such capacity. EPRS is thus tasked with two broad responsibilities: (a) emergency preparedness, at both the institutional and country-specific levels; and (b) emergency response.

2. Since 1991, UNHCR has responded to a number of massive outflows. These responses have been undertaken in close cooperation with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), other United Nations agencies and the wider humanitarian community. UNHCR has thus sought to make a significant contribution to enhancing the emergency response capacity of the United Nations system. UNHCR has also benefited from new cooperative arrangements developed with other humanitarian agencies and governmental institutions, including military forces.

3. Having dispatched over 300 emergency missions throughout the world since 1992, the Office now has in place a viable emergency response model, which it continuously strives to improve in the light of field experiences and evaluations. As part of this ongoing process, the Office is currently reviewing its response to the recent Kosovo emergency. It is anticipated that further challenges will be faced as forced human displacements continue to occur. More recently, there have been a number of scattered crises, often of a relatively smaller scale and with limited international visibility. These conflicts have been mostly internal and localized, although external involvement is often a critical factor in the conflict. Those forced to flee their homes, as well as the humanitarian workers assisting them, are increasingly targeted by the warring factions. While improved communications have enhanced UNHCR's ability to operate, even in some remote locations, the various factors outlined above are being incorporated into the ongoing review of UNHCR's emergency response model.

4. The essential elements of UNHCR's emergency response mechanism have been described in previous reports to the Standing Committee (EC/SC.2/1991/CRP.25, EC/1992/SC.2/CRP.15 and EC/1995/SC.2/CRP.28). As recalled below, they are grouped around institutional and situational preparedness, as well as the emergency response itself. Specific developments in 1998 and 1999 are summarized in Sections II and III.

A. Institutional preparedness

5. Institutional preparedness concerns maintaining the necessary resources, procedures and capacity for UNHCR to respond quickly, efficiently and effectively to emergencies. Preparedness activities include the following: development and maintenance of various stand-by emergency resources; development of emergency management tools; provision of capacity-building/training programmes; and

liaison with outside agencies on matters relating to emergency preparedness. Among these, the most frequently used are:

- A core staff of senior officers, as well as the emergency response team roster of some 30 well-trained UNHCR staff members who are on standby for emergency deployment during a six-month cycle;
- The provision of an additional pool of external standby personnel from partner agencies;
- The availability of essential relief items maintained in the Central Emergency Stockpile located in the Amsterdam and Copenhagen warehouses; and
- An intensive emergency management training programme that has benefited some 2000 persons worldwide from within UNHCR, United Nations agencies, and government and implementing partners.

B. Situational preparedness and contingency planning

6. Situational preparedness is aimed at enhancing the overall state of readiness that is needed to identify, monitor, plan for, and respond to emergency situations within a defined geographical area. Under this broad approach, efforts are being made to improve the capacity of the Office to respond at the country/situational level through early identification of emergency-prone situations and an emphasis on preventive measures, as well as advocacy and facilitation of contingency planning exercises. These exercises aim to ensure optimal use of stand-by resources and a timely and effective emergency response. Contingency planning is considered as the critical bridge which links institutional preparedness with situational preparedness

C. Emergency response

7. Emergency response, on the other hand, encompasses activities undertaken at the situational or country level to directly support UNHCR operations and field offices to cope effectively with an emergency situation. These essentially include: (a) the rapid deployment of emergency personnel available in-house or through rosters maintained for both internal and external staff; and (b) facilitating the timely dispatch of other emergency resources, such as staff support equipment and emergency relief items.

II. ACTIVITIES IN 1998

8. In 1998, over 60 emergency deployment missions were undertaken by various categories of staff and personnel of the standby mechanisms. These missions were dispatched to assist emergency or repatriation operations in Liberia, Guinea, Kosovo, Albania, the Great Lakes region of Africa, Thailand, Cambodia and Nicaragua. Altogether, these missions totalled over 5,000 mission-days in 1998. As in previous years, Africa remained the major destination of these emergency deployment missions. There was a proliferation of small and chronic emergency situations during the year, as distinct from the large-scale emergencies that occurred in the previous few years. Lessons learned from these recent emergencies have been studied in order to modify emergency deployment procedures.

9. Some 100 individuals from 23 countries in Asia and Africa benefited from emergency management training in 1998, provided in Beijing, Pretoria, Kuala Lumpur and Banjul. These workshops were geared towards mid-level managers and support staff in the field, including UNHCR staff, government officials and NGO staff.

10. Another form of emergency training, the Workshop on Emergency Management for Emergency Response Teams (WEM/ERT) was held twice in 1998, benefiting some 60 UNHCR staff; one was held in Gollion, Switzerland and another in Goteborg/Skovde, Sweden, in close collaboration with and support of the Swiss Civil Defence and the Swedish Rescue Services Agency, respectively. Aimed at preparing standby roster members for actual emergency deployment, the WEM/ERT workshop is considered the most essential emergency training, as it is directly linked with UNHCR's ability to mobilize staff for emergency response. In 1998, the WEM training was revised to include more field-oriented, practical skills that are needed in more extreme emergency assignments. The third regular session of the Workshop on Emergency Management at Headquarters (WEM/HQ) was held in November 1998 with the

participation of some 20 UNHCR staff, and designed to enable Headquarters-based staff to more effectively manage and support emergency operations from Headquarters.

11. During 1998, two new training initiatives were added: the piloting of an Advanced Emergency Management Seminar, and development of distance learning modules for emergency training. This latter initiative is funded by a special contribution from Japan Committee for Refugee Relief. Currently, three of the five modules under preparation are in final draft form and will soon be available to staff in all UNHCR offices.

12. In keeping with the recent emphasis on situational preparedness and in recognition of shortcomings in this critical area, greater efforts were made during the year to improve early warning and contingency planning; training modules were especially redesigned to focus on practical skills required for contingency planning and were distributed to UNHCR, government and NGO personnel. For countries and regions considered to be emergency-prone, direct assistance was also provided by staff of EPRS to assist in initiating and/or facilitating contingency planning processes. In 1998, this support was provided to UNHCR field offices in Albania, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Senegal, the Great Lakes region of Africa, Chad, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Republic of Korea.

13. In the second half of 1998, an Emergency Operations Room (EOR) was established at Headquarters. It became fully functional in September 1998 and has provided UNHCR emergency managers and their staff with a flexible, self-contained work environment. The EOR is available around the clock and has a broad array of operational equipment with which to better monitor events and manage the flow of information. In early October 1998, when it looked as if diplomatic initiatives might fail in Kosovo, the EOR was put into full 24-hour use for the first time by staff members of the former Yugoslavia Liaison Unit. Later, in early 1999, the EOR became the "nerve centre" for the Headquarters team that supported UNHCR's operations in the Balkans.

III. ACTIVITIES IN 1999

14. EPRS's activities in 1999 in terms of emergency response have been unprecedented, surpassing even the Great Lakes crisis of late 1996 and early 1997. Since March 1999, a total of 87 emergency personnel have been deployed directly by EPRS to assist the Kosovo-related emergencies in Albania, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. In addition to this deployment, two small emergency teams, totalling some 13 individuals, were dispatched during the same period to deal with emergency operations in northern Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These deployments included UNHCR staff members (both EPRS and ERT roster members) and personnel from external agencies under the standby arrangements with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and United Nations Volunteers (UNVs). The majority of deployments of external standby personnel were provided as contributions-in-kind, of which the value has been estimated at close to \$ 1 million.

15. With the operational focus on the massive return of refugees and displaced persons to Kosovo in mid-June, additional emergency staffing resources were mobilized to support the return operation. EPRS dispatched some 30 staff through emergency standby mechanisms, namely EPRS/ERT (10), NRC/DRC (7) and UNVs (14).

16. Situational preparedness activities mainly included a series of consultations undertaken early in 1999 with the regional Bureaux to examine emergency-prone situations and identify critical actions needed to maintain an appropriate level of readiness. In March 1999, EPRS produced *A Global Overview of Situational Preparedness*, which highlighted the outcome of the consultations and offered a review of overall situational preparedness. Due to the Kosovo emergency, this work was temporarily postponed and will be resumed on the basis of operational plans submitted recently by UNHCR's field offices.

17. Following a similar exercise begun in August 1998, an inter-agency meeting was held in Nairobi on contingency planning for the Great Lakes region of Africa. Seven UNHCR offices in countries adjacent to the Democratic Republic of the Congo attended, as well as representatives of the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Food and Agriculture Organization

(FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and OCHA. EPRS assisted in preparing the exercise, and co-facilitated the meeting with OCHA.

18. The second version of the *Handbook for Emergencies* was published in 1999. It stresses the importance of pre-emergency and contingency planning, operational planning at every stage of a refugee crisis, and coordination priorities. Important information has also been included on staff safety, working with military personnel and how to cope with personal stress. With financial assistance from the Nippon Foundation, it will be translated into French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Japanese.

19. As a result of the Kosovo emergency, some training exercises have had to be scaled back. However, the WEM/ERT has continued. The first session was organized in Switzerland (Swiss Civil Defence) in March 1999, and the second session is planned in Denmark in September 1999, with the Danish Emergency Management Agency (DEMA) hosting. Although training of UNHCR staff remains a primary focus, this workshop now provides a limited number of places to non-UNHCR staff drawn from the United Nations, NGOs and the donor community.

20. One session of the EMTP, in the form of the traditional two-week session, took place from 31 July to 11 August in Jordan. Participants included government staff from countries adjacent to Iraq and the Horn of Africa. Two other regional, one-week sessions will take place in late September 1999 in Guinea for West African countries.

IV. CONCLUSION

21. UNHCR continuously strives to enhance its capacity to be ready for and respond to refugee emergencies. In 2000, the Office intends to maintain and strengthen institutional emergency preparedness through improved in-house capacity building, staff development, updating and development of new emergency management tools and standby emergency resources. It will also increase liaison with external bodies to improve inter-agency coordination and collaboration, and to ensure the availability of complementary emergency resources. In particular, efforts will be made to review the lessons learned from the evaluation of the Kosovo emergency that is currently being undertaken.