

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

I. OBJECTIVES AND FOCUS OF PAPER

1. The changing nature of the humanitarian operational environment, including UNHCR's involvement in the Humanitarian Response Initiative and the introduction of the cluster approach to emergency response, has necessitated a degree of change in the Office's response to complex emergencies and natural disasters. This paper looks at current measures being taken by UNHCR to strengthen its emergency preparedness and response and adapt to the challenges of this new working environment.

II. INTERNAL RESTRUCTURING

2. In early 2006, the Emergency and Security Service (ESS) was amalgamated with other technical operations services in the Division of Operational Services to form the Emergency and Technical Support Service, as part of the Office's overall restructuring exercise. This amalgamation has brought the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section of ESS (EPRS) closer to the technical operational support units, thus strengthening the capacity of both services to provide effective reinforcement to UNHCR's programmes.

3. As UNHCR's dedicated emergency response section, EPRS continues to assist UNHCR's regional bureaux, desks and field representations/offices in developing local capacity for situational preparedness, including through the contingency planning process. There has been a significant improvement in the collaboration between bureaux/desks and EPRS during 2005, with a better understanding of the support role of EPRS and the mainstreaming of preparedness activities into operations.

III. RESPONDING TO THE EVOLVING OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

A. Challenges

4. The operational environment in which humanitarian organizations work continues to change and UNHCR is endeavouring to respond accordingly. Various elements of humanitarian reform have been introduced by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, including the new cluster leadership approach. Under this approach, UNHCR has taken on the lead for the protection, camp coordination and maintenance and emergency shelter clusters in situations of conflict-related displacement. This means that UNHCR has to undertake significant new responsibilities with regard to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in emergencies, and has to organize itself and mobilize the necessary resources accordingly.

B. Emergency response: staffing, deployments and equipment

5. UNHCR responded to two 'new' types of emergency in 2005. The Office played a significant role in the response to two natural disasters - the tsunami response in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Somalia, and the South Asia Earthquake response in northern Pakistan. A small advisory team was also deployed to the Hurricane Katrina response in the United States. UNHCR also contributed to the deployment of teams to several relatively small, but highly sensitive, operations which required substantial human resources due to the nature of the response. The latter deployments required a more intensive protection response in the form of Refugee Status Determination (RSD) to groups of refugees in Kyrgyzstan (requiring emergency RSD and humanitarian evacuation), in Romania (RSD) and in Egypt.

6. Apart from these operations, the largest deployments of emergency staff were to western Sudan (Darfur) and South Sudan. As an example, four administrative staff from EPRS were deployed for a total of 332 days to support operations in Darfur and in South Sudan, and another 50 Emergency Response Team (ERT) members were deployed for an average of 71 days, making a total of 3,532 days.

7. EPRS deployable staff (12 staff members) provided support to the regional bureaux through direct involvement in a number of emergency and repatriation operations. In 2005, the focus was essentially on Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Benin and Ghana. EPRS staff spent a total of 874 mission days out in the Field for this purpose.

8. The Emergency Roster continues to be the primary resource for emergency response personnel. In 2005, it consisted of 99 staff, including 90 UNHCR staff members (including international UNVs) and 9 external partners. In 2005, some 215 deployments were processed through EPRS to 23 different countries. The total number of days of mission amounted to 14,822, averaging 73 days per mission. Deployments included missions to various operations in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East. These included ERTs comprised of UNHCR and UNV staff, as well as staff provided by partners on standby agreements.

9. UNHCR ensured that all staff on mission to emergency operation areas were equipped with briefing kits and that some had participated in a Situational Emergency Training programme relevant to the operation. The briefing kits include key information on the country/area, nature and modalities of UNHCR programmes/operations, and other relevant details ranging from living conditions to Minimum Operating Security Standards (MOSS) requirements.

C. Follow-up measures and Plan of Action

10. UNHCR has developed a new Plan of Action (PoA) for strengthening its Emergency Response capacity to respond to emergencies of up to 500,000 persons. This PoA reflects the outcomes of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Working Group discussions on the Humanitarian Response Initiative, taking into account the cluster approach developed by the working groups and various concerns relating to IDP operations. The Plan includes: cost analysis for the provision of non-food items; an increase in the number of Emergency Preparedness and Response staff; the provision of resources for the appointment of an emergency IT/Telecoms officer and an emergency logistics officer; and proposals for changes in UNHCR's Operations Review Board (ORB) rules. A sixth Emergency Preparedness and Response officer post has been re-established as of the beginning of 2006.

11. UNHCR has also produced an updated list of response equipment for emergencies. Equipment for Information Technology and Telecoms Situational Emergency Training has been purchased and will be packed in light containers ready for deployment with emergency teams. A new transportable VHF radio repeater with innovative features has been produced and ten units will be stockpiled for emergency deployments. UNHCR continues to review the management of its stockpiles of technical equipment, including the procedures for replenishment.

12. The capacity to mobilize resources for additional requirements in response to large-scale emergency operations remains an ongoing issue. Some standby agreements will be reinforced and the Telecoms Unit will soon be able to provide two HQ-based technicians to respond at short notice to requests for emergency telecoms assistance.

IV. STRENGTHENING PREPAREDNESS

13. This section describes various ongoing developments and activities being undertaken to strengthen UNHCR's emergency preparedness.

A. Early Warning

14. UNHCR continues to develop more effective early warning mechanisms, including the Action Alert early warning system. The system classifies countries into one of four early warning categories (Red, Orange, Yellow, Blue) based on any anticipated increase in UNHCR's operational activity and level of preparedness focussed on refugee movements. A revision of the system is expected to be completed by mid-2006, introducing the concept of "Scale and Likelihood" components into the system. In addition, recommended preparedness activities (e.g. contingency planning, in-country stockpiling and establishing potential emergency teams) are linked to the new early warning categorization, providing the system with a more objective and systematic approach to early warning.

15. EPRS continues to be an active participant of the IASC Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency planning which is working on improving and coordinating the agencies' early warning and emergency preparedness systems with a view to more timely and efficient inter-agency response to emergencies. An early warning-early action report from the Working Group is presented to the IASC for endorsement on a quarterly basis. The report is a tool to enhance inter-agency early warning and preparedness and to meet the demands of potentially new humanitarian inter-agency crises in the coming six months.

B. Contingency Planning

16. EPRS was directly or indirectly involved in the contingency planning processes in a number of countries and areas, including Benin, Cameroon, Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia/Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Haiti, Kosovo (Serbia and Montenegro), Jordan, Malaysia/Indonesia (for future repatriation to Banda Ache), Nepal, Sudan and Uganda. Seven EPRS staff spent a total of 213 days on deployment for this purpose. A number of these contingency planning exercises involved inter-agency collaboration.

C. Training

17. Three Workshops on Emergency Management (WEM) were held in 2005 in Sweden, Norway and Germany. A total of 88 UNHCR and UNV staff participated as well as 27 external participants (including NGO partners, UN agencies and donors). The contents of the workshop have been revised to incorporate IDP concerns and will be tested at the next WEM in March 2006.

18. EPRS also delivered a number of workshops on Situational Emergency Training: in Jordan, on the Returnee and Repatriation Situation in Iraq and on Capacity building in Iraq; in Ghana, on the Ivorian Situation; in Georgia, on Emergency Preparedness in Georgia and Azerbaijan. In Ghana, a Situational Emergency Training seminar was also conducted for ECOWAS partners.

19. UNHCR is finalizing the development of an Emergency Team Leader Programme course following an IASC request to lead this process. The course material includes a wide range of managerial and coordination issues in addition to the technical components, all of which are tailored to the new emergency response cluster approach and IDP situations.

D. Equipment

20. The Emergency Tools Catalogue, last updated in 2004, is being updated and will incorporate new technical tools as well as new procedures and instructions. Having resolved some of the technical problems, the CD-Rom version of the Tools was distributed throughout 2005 to the ERT roster members during the resource management sessions of the Workshops on Emergency Management.

E. Partnership

21. In addition to the renewal of existing standby agreements with the Danish Refugee Council and the Norwegian Refugee Council for another two years, UNHCR signed a new agreement in May 2005 with the Swedish Rescue Services Agency to provide support to UNHCR staff in terms of staff and office accommodation. Discussions are also at an advanced stage with Technisches Hilfswerk on a new agreement to further extend cooperation between UNHCR and its operating partners.

F. Emergency Procedures and Handbook

22. Significant efforts have been undertaken to develop current organizational emergency procedures. A draft has been tabled for further review and is expected to be finalized by mid-2006. These Emergency Procedures will incorporate issues raised through the Humanitarian Response Initiative, including IDP concerns. The UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies is being reviewed and updated; a revised version in English is expected by mid-2006.

V. CONCLUSION

23. More than ever before, a core challenge for UNHCR remains the continued development and timely implementation of effective, predictable - yet flexible - preparedness and response mechanisms in complex humanitarian emergencies. The cluster approach developed during the Humanitarian Response Initiative, of which UNHCR is a strong proponent, is a collective step in this respect, requiring the entire humanitarian and international community to work together in developing effective solutions to complex humanitarian emergencies.

24. For UNHCR to be a dependable partner for both refugee and IDP situations, it needs to strengthen its own initiatives in emergency response and seek adequate resources for this. UNHCR will therefore continue to strengthen its capacity in early warning, preparedness and response, while developing strong partnerships with other United Nations agencies and other humanitarian organizations.

25. UNHCR will keep the Standing Committee informed of challenges faced and progress made in strengthening emergency preparedness and response capacities, and looks forward to the Committee's continued strong support, and any direction it may be able to offer for managing these responsibilities.