

Briefing Note

The management of humanitarian emergencies caused by extreme climate events

UNHCR Emergency Preparedness and Response • April 2009

Commitment, capacity and experience

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) continues to up-date and strengthen its overall ability to respond to complex humanitarian emergencies through the application of internal emergency rosters, Standby Agreements with partners, use of a Central Emergency Stockpile (CES) of non-food items, early warning mechanisms, contingency planning, and the ongoing development of more effective emergency management mechanisms and surge capacities. Ensuring UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response capacity in relation to refugees, internally displaced persons, and exceptionally - yet

increasingly - those directly affected by extreme climate events and natural disasters, is a commitment of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

While natural disasters are not included in the Office's mandate, UNHCR has increasingly been called upon to assist the overall humanitarian effort in the aftermath of a natural disaster. This is mainly due to its local or regional capacity for a particular location, and because of its global expertise in emergency response in the field of protection, emergency shelter, camp management and other humanitarian protection related activities.

CAPACITY

A FOUR-FOLD EMERGENCY RESPONSE STRATEGY

At any given time UNHCR has the capacity to respond to an emergency directly impacting up to 500,000 people.

This response capacity consists of four components:

1. Emergency Staffing (including through partnership)

UNHCR's staffing surge capacity consists of more than 150 staff selected from UNHCR offices worldwide, placed on an Emergency Response Team (ERT) roster. The Office also has agreements with external partners⁽¹⁾ creating an additional standby capacity of several hundred personnel, mostly NGO personnel, ready to be deployed to an emergency alongside UNHCR staff. This combined capacity enables UNHCR to mobilize within 72 hours more than 300 trained personnel. In most situations, this would suffice to provide an emergency response during the first six months for situations affecting up to 500,000 people.

UNHCR has sought to broaden the qualifications on its roster and deployments, by, amongst others, strengthening the existing agreements with Standby Partners, reviewing all technical agreements,⁽²⁾ and developing an additional in-house capacity for technical expertise, in particular in the areas of protection, emergency shelter, camp management / camp coordination, water,

sanitation and health. Another way of meeting the Organization's evolving responsibilities and urgent needs in terms of skills and qualifications has been the strong partnership developed with the United Nations Volunteer program.

2. Emergency Stockpiles: Non-Food Items and Operational Support Items

UNHCR's relief item capacity is composed of a Central Emergency Stockpile (CES) - located in Copenhagen and Dubai - of non-food items (NFIs) covering the needs of up to 500,000 beneficiaries. Items include blankets, light weight tents, plastic sheeting, jerry cans, kitchen sets, all-terrain vehicles, heavy-duty trucks, prefabricated warehouses, office and accommodation modules, health kits, IT and telecommunications equipment, and other essential support items. All of these items can be shipped within 24 hours to any location thanks to long-standing agreements with freight forwarders, logistics companies, and the use of specially chartered aircraft.

In addition, UNHCR can also draw from its regional stockpiles located in South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania and Jordan, as well as in-country stockpiles related to refugee and IDP operations worldwide.

3. Accelerated Internal Financial Surge Procedures

In order to respond faster and more efficiently to emergencies, UNHCR has developed mechanisms for the immediate mobilization of financial resources, including access to an Operational Reserve, within hours of the request being received and approved.

4. Early Warning and Preparedness, including Training and Capacity-building

UNHCR has developed its emergency training programs to reinforce its institutional capacity and to strengthen its situational preparedness and response. Emergency training sessions are up-dated with the latest developments, best practices and lessons-learned from actual deployments. The key workshops are:

- The Workshop on Emergency Management⁽³⁾ (WEM) which aims to prepare members of UNHCR's ERT roster for deployment to emergency operations. The WEM is an intensive, field-oriented, practical and highly participatory training. Every effort is made to create the atmosphere of an actual emergency deployment. The main subjects include team-building, operations planning, financial and administrative systems, operational partnerships, communication and negotiation skills, security, coordination and information-sharing, telecommunication network structure, needs assessment, and humanitarian protection.

- The Situational Emergency Training (SET) is offered to mid-level managers and support staff with some emergency and

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field experience. Initiated by a request from UNHCR offices in emergency-prone countries or regions, the SET focuses on a particular emergency situation (or an evolving crisis scenario) in a given region, and places high priority on team planning.

- The Emergency Team Leadership Programme (ETLP) is organized by UNHCR on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) with the aim to strengthen individual leadership skills of senior managers, and to foster the ongoing development of best practices in emergency leadership.

- b. UNHCR's eCentre in Tokyo is helping improve emergency preparedness and response capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region through targeted training and other capacity-building measures. UNHCR has undertaken a number of trainings such as for ECOWAS monitoring officers in early warning indicators.

UNHCR actively contributed to the inter-agency endeavour to enhance early warning and preparedness, including the IASC Sub-Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency Planning and the efforts to develop early warning policies, procedures and tools. The on-line contingency planning toolbox, targeting humanitarian country teams was, for example, launched in 2008 and has received positive feed-back from field operators. The related inter-agency training module was also finalized.

UNHCR also contributes to the inter-agency effort to design a portal for real-time, on-line, forecasting of potential conflicts; known as HEWSWeb II. Scaled according to needs, it will provide daily monitoring of situations, and assist decision-makers in emergency preparedness and response decisions.

UNHCR facilitates inter-agency efforts in bridging information gaps in the response to / or the need for contingency planning such as in Kenya (floods affecting refugees and local population), Myanmar (cyclone) and South Africa (xenophobia and mixed migration flows).

UNHCR operations in the field, particularly in tropical and semi-tropical regions that are often subject to climate-induced disasters such as floods, hurricanes and tropical storms, and landslides, have developed

disaster management plans adapting to their specific needs aimed at saving lives and ensuring the continuity of essential services in the areas of water, sanitation, food, shelter and health. These plans include setting-up contingency measures to respond to disasters in and around refugee camps as well as preparedness and capacity-building activities

1. *Current standby partners include: the Norwegian and Danish Refugee Councils, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence (EMERCOM), the Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning of Norway, AUSTCARE, the United Nations Volunteers, DFID and OXFAM.*
2. *Technical agreements were reviewed with: Save the Children Norway and Sweden, RedR Australia and the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention.*
3. *In 2008, four workshops were held, each hosting up to 40 participants, 25 of whom were UNHCR ERT roster members. Up to 15 places were offered to stand-by and operational partners, United Nations agencies and donor representatives.*

such as training for refugees, partner agencies, local host population and government entities. As UNHCR often operates in remote areas of a country where development partners and government activities have limited access, its contribution in the domain of disaster management and risk reduction plays an important role at the local level.

UNHCR AND NATURAL DISASTERS

A SIGNIFICANT INVOLVEMENT IN RELIEF EFFORTS

UNHCR's involvement in providing relief to people displaced within their own country as a result of natural disasters has traditionally been determined on a case-by-case basis.

Generally speaking, when UNHCR has an established presence and operation in a country that has been struck by a natural disaster, the High Commissioner has offered support to the government and local authorities in a show of solidarity responding to the human imperative, and as a contribution to the broader international and UN relief efforts. Indeed, UNHCR's presence in deep-field locations and its strategically located emergency stockpiles allow the Organization to provide immediate humanitarian assistance.

UNHCR also participates in UN and Humanitarian Country Team contingency planning for natural disasters, and is committed to working with systems for disaster management, particularly with the IASC cluster leads in natural disasters.

Some notable examples of UNHCR's emergency interventions include the following: the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 South-Asian earthquake, the 2006 floods in Somalia, the 2007 floods in Pakistan, the floods in Yemen in 2008, the earthquake in China and cyclone-related flooding in Myanmar all in the same year.

A CASE STUDY:

CYCLONE NARGIS, MYANMAR

UNHCR provided a significant contribution to the inter-agency and international response in assisting those affected by Cyclone Nargis.

Despite administrative difficulties with obtaining entry visas for Myanmar, UNHCR - in only a few days - identified and deployed an Emergency Response Team (ERT) to support the UNHCR country representation in Yangon. Initial tasks of the ERT included critical needs assessments, managing non-food item distributions, establishing an operational presence in the affected areas, and liaison and coordination with all actors and partners.

The following was mobilized:

- **Human resources**

Nine ERT members were deployed;

- **Material resources**

Non-food items were dispatched, including over 90,000 plastic sheets, 3,000 plastic rolls, 120,000 blankets, 52,000 kitchen sets, 120,000 mosquito nets, and 100,000 jerry cans.

- **Coordination**

During the initial phase of the relief operation, UNHCR assumed the cluster-lead role for Emergency Shelter and NFI (due to the delayed arrival of the IFRC team). UNHCR at the capital and field levels significantly contributed to inter-agency collaboration including informally coordinating the Protection Cluster.



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