Initial Response to Complex Emergencies and Natural Disasters

Ed Tsui

On January 17, 2002, one of Africa's most active volcanoes unexpectedly erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As lava rapidly advanced toward the lakeside city below, fuel depots erupted into slow burning fires, tremors and shocks crumbled buildings and collapsed houses, heat and lava flows destroyed water and electrical systems, ash covered the landscape and lava-turned-to-rock covered parts of the lake.

As a result, about 400,000 of Goma's 500,000 habitants were forced to flee to unstable areas of the DRC and Rwanda, where rebel elements remained active. Nine died, and one hundred were wounded. About 40 percent of the town's infrastructure was destroyed, leaving thousands without electricity or potable water.

If ever there were a typical natural disaster, the eruption of Mount Nyirangongo was not it. Its location on a contentious border in an area plagued by armed conflicted placed it squarely in the middle of a long-standing, regional, complex emergency, where state and nonstate actors compete for control, misinformation is rampant, and humanitarian access is limited.

A number of other factors added to the complexity of the response including the many actors involved; the threat of further eruptions or factures from associated volcanic *and* seismic activity, whose interplay was classified by both vulcanologists and seismologists alike as a new phenomena; and the potential for contamination of Lake Kivu, a primary source of both food and drinking water in an already impoverished area and, ironically, of noxious gases that threatened to ignite.

Yet the international humanitarian response was as quick as it was comprehensive, and, in spite of the complexity of the situation, largely succeed in alleviating the immediate needs of those most affected.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) was but one of many players who made this response a success. OCHA and its partners over the years have learned a great deal about the types of tools, mechanisms, and processes needed for an effective emergency response. New technologies, increases in the scope and magnitude of both complex emergencies and natural hazards, as well as the need for common tools to address them, and a growing appreciation by the Member States of the importance of humanitarian assistance and the protection of civilian to the achievement of peace, security, and development are only a few of the trends that have shaped the

nature of emergency response as we know it today. But despite the growing need for humanitarian interventions in ever more complex operating environments, the key lessons learned by the international humanitarian community regarding emergency response in the last two decades are straightforward. In short, over time we have come to understand that an effective response depends on the following:

1. Solid needs assessments that allow relief agencies to jointly determine who does what where, under the umbrella of a comprehensive humanitarian action plan
2. The proper staff and emergency response tools available at the right time in the right place
3. Common tools for natural disasters and complex emergencies, to be adapted for application
4. Emergency funding mechanisms that ensure money is readily available and easily dispersed
5. Well-developed information management networks through which accurate-as-possible data are immediately available to key decision makers
6. Reviews that draw the lessons learned from each response and help apply them to the next

Each of these lessons was manifested in the Goma response, which included, among other actions, early reinforcements of experienced humanitarian staff, including a senior emergency manager; the provision, through daily updates, of credible and timely information about the crisis at both the field and international levels; the on-site establishment of extraordinary information exchanges and a specialized center to process, analyze, and share humanitarian data; the issuance of an interagency emergency appeal for funds; the rapid dispatch of vulcanologists to the field; and the procurement of emergency nonfood items for the affected population.

As such, this particular response to a sudden onset emergency highlights not only the need for, but also the increasing efforts by, aid actors, in particular OCHA, to ensure that the above elements are consistently at the disposal of the international system, so that each response is timely yet flexible, specialized when needed, and above all, well coordinated.

As an example of how aid can effectively reach it victims also provides a benchmark of comparison to other international emergency responses, where, for whatever reasons, action was neither as swift nor as decisive. Thus, it further highlights the need for greater consistency in the application of the emergency response tools and mechanisms at the disposal of the international humanitarian community.

Before I elaborate on these lessons and themes, it is useful to understand the increasingly challenging and multifaceted backdrop against which aid workers struggle to deliver assistance in the field and that has shaped the formulation of emergency response.

Natural Disaster and Complex Emergencies

In the last two decades alone, more than three million people have died in natural disasters caused by extreme weather resulting from global warming and other related atmospheric changes, as well as by deforestation and soil erosion caused by unsustainable development practices. Combined with poverty and population pressure, growing numbers of people are being forced to live in harm's way, on floodplains, unstable hillsides, and earthquake-prone zones.

Similarly, the end of the Cold War has resulted in profound changes not only in the number but also in the nature of armed, internal conflicts. In the last decade of the twentieth century, regions once thought to be beyond war, such as Europe, became entrenched in it; simmering socioeconomic tensions in many African countries resurfaced; and the war on terrorism gave way to far reaching humanitarian implications in Central Asia and the Middle East. In this period, conflicts have claimed more than five million lives and driven many times that number of people from their homes. At present, it is estimated that more than 40 million people have been displaced by conflict worldwide.

Increasingly, as we saw in Goma, the traditional distinctions between the two types of crises—natural disasters and complex emergencies—are not always so clear. Interplay between the two has become common. This is particularly true in the case of drought, which differs from most natural disasters in that it is slow in onset and may continue for a prolonged period of time, which can lead to a conflict over scarce resources. In ongoing emergencies, drought can also exacerbate existing tensions.

Whatever the cause, the resulting effects of these emergencies are similar. They include extensive violence and loss of life, increasingly among innocent noncombatants and civilians, massive displacements of people, and widespread damage to societies and economies. But despite the similarities, key differences in the immediacy, duration, scope, and political complexity of a crisis have increasingly called for special capacities or services in the initial response.

Immediacy

In the event of a natural disaster, such as an earthquake or volcano, thousands of lives are put at immediate risk. Many can be lost within hours or days of the incident if search and rescue and other life-saving efforts are delayed. In these cases, a rapid initial response is critical, and often more easily applicable, to the goal of saving lives.

Complex emergencies, on the other hand, are characterized by a total or considerable breakdown of authority. They usually involve more deliberate violence—and therefore violations of human

rights and international humanitarian law—targeted at civilians, as well as political and military constraints that hinder response and pose more significant and sinister security risks to aid workers.

Duration

As a result of these differences in immediacy, the life-saving stage that follows a natural disaster response may be over within a matter of days or weeks, notwithstanding the reconstruction efforts that may follow.

The chronic humanitarian needs arising from war, however, often continue for months and even years. Additionally, as the nature of an emergency changes—for example, from the immediate aftermath of military action, to a long-simmering standoff between government and militant groups, to a negotiated peace—humanitarian assistance programs may evolve and become more varied, encompassing simultaneous relief programs as well as rehabilitation and reintegration activities. These situations necessitate longer-term initiatives designed to minimize human suffering over time.

Scope

Natural disasters increasingly span several countries. For instance, when successive cyclones hit southeastern Africa in February 2001, rivers and dams over-flowed throughout the region, resulting in widespread flooding in Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, affecting more than two million people. But although several neighboring countries can be affected by the same natural disaster, especially in case of drought, their relationships are not always strained, and cooperation is more common.

In complex emergency situations, however, the international and cross-border dimensions are almost always characterized by political differences between those concerned. One need not look further than the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Great Lakes region of Africa, or the West African subregion for examples of how conflict spreads, displacing thousands in a tangled web of cross-border movements. Responding to such crises requires a higher level of regional coordination and interaction with a greater multiplicity of actors, who are often at odds with each other.

Key Elements of a Successful Response

Against this backdrop, the international community has seen an increasing trend toward more integrated, as well as more standardized, yet flexible, application of initial response procedures, tools, and mechanisms in crises. This versatility entails being able to deal with the full range and

potential interplay of crises, from purely complex emergency and natural disasters situations to every possible combination in between, based on common platform of response practices, tools, and mechanisms that consist of the following:

1. *Solid needs assessments that allow relief agencies to determine jointly who does what where, under the umbrella of a comprehensive humanitarian action plan*

When a crisis erupts, the international community—including government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), donors, member states, the Red Cross Movement, and the United Nations—is usually alerted by an array of monitoring systems, including individual as well as shared sources of information, ranging from the field reports to earthquake bulletins, weather notices, and press reports. Once alerted to a crisis, the international humanitarian community must gauge the willingness of the affected state to accept assistance. Although the primary responsibility for taking care of the victims of crisis always rests with the affected state, governments whose national capacities are not sufficient to meet the needs may either directly request assistance or pose no objections to humanitarian assistance.

Once the acceptance or nonobjection to aid is established, the humanitarian community focuses its attention on ensuring the impartial and timely interagency assessment of the humanitarian situation on the ground. These assessments, often led by OCHA in its role as a nonoperational and therefore unbiased facilitator of humanitarian response, are vital to ensuring that a wide spectrum of policy and decision makers are well informed from the outset of crisis, when time sensitive decisions regarding funding, deployments of staff and assets, and staff security must be made under enormous pressure. OCHA’s experience has shown the importance of striking a balance between the depth and speed of reporting and the accuracy of the initial assessments. In crisis situations, initial assessments often must be updated hourly to reflect new, incoming information resulting from fast-moving events. Emphasis must therefore be placed on conveying what is known at the moment.

They also form the basis for the coordination of assistance in a rapidly evolving situation involving a multiplicity of actors with sometimes overlapping mandates. Especially critical is the prioritization of needs—whether they be in the food, shelter, health, water, sanitation, or protection sectors—and the subsequent assignment of tasks and responsibilities based on the individual mandates, strengths, and comparative advantage of each organization. Thus in response to a sudden onset crisis, initial actions may focus on determining who does what where. OCHA’s role is to ensure that, drawing on system-wide capacities, all needs are met without duplication and that often-scarce resources are efficiently used.

Ongoing assessments throughout the crisis will then form the basis of longer-term interagency planning efforts designed to ensure that there is (1) a common understanding of the problems and constraints besetting affected populations, (2) a joint and complementary action plan for addressing them, and finally (3) an effective use of limited resources for those activities that are of mutual concern to all—such as communication, logistics, security, and information management. These are often realized through the development of a Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP), which forms the basis of an inter-agency appeal process, of which OCHA is the custodian. Through this process—known as the Inter-Agency Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP)—national, regional, and international relief organizations jointly develop a common humanitarian programming, strategic planning, and resource mobilization document, which is regularly reviewed and revised. In the event of a sudden deterioration of an existing emergency for which a CAP has already been developed, the plans to respond to the evolving crisis may already have been incorporated in the CAP as possible planning scenarios. If not, the CAP may be rapidly reviewed and revised to reflect the new needs. Similarly, in cases where a natural disaster occurs in a country with a CAP, a revised CAP is usually issued, reflecting the new needs presented by the natural disaster.

In natural disaster settings, needs are determined jointly by the resident agencies on the basis of rapid assessments, which are conveyed along with funding needs in situation reports that are issued within the first twenty-four hours of a crisis and then updated daily.

2. *The proper staff and emergency response tools available at the right time in the right place*

No matter how experienced the first in-country responders to an emergency are, the sudden onset of a crisis is inevitably marked by alarm and confusion as national authorities and their UN and NGO counterparts struggle to assess the situation, often in conditions of extreme danger and limited access. Depending on the type of crisis, the leading humanitarian official on the ground, usually the UN Resident Coordinator (RC), may be forced to deal with many competing concerns, ranging from assessing the situation to evacuating nonessential staff to dealing with the media. Coordination at this stage is especially critical to ensuring that humanitarian assistance is delivered in a targeted, effective, and complementary manner.

OCHA facilitates this process by either rapidly establishing a field presence and coordination structures in country or by providing extra support to actors already in the country in the form of temporary rapid response teams, otherwise known as “surge” capacity.

Usually, existing resident agencies—headed by the RC—will support the government’s efforts to respond to a disaster or complex emergency. If new structures are needed, OCHA’s head, the Under-

Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Emergency Relief Coordinator (USG/ERC), in consultation with a range of humanitarian actors, determines—based on analysis of the humanitarian, political, military, and security situation—whether the crisis warrants a country or regional response, and decides which coordination mechanisms best fit, including whether there is a need to appoint a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) to oversee the coordination of international aid efforts. Often the Resident Coordinator will also serve as the Humanitarian Coordinator (R/HC). These permanent structures help ensure not only the success of the initial response, but the development of common strategic planning and monitoring of humanitarian assistance throughout a crisis.

Either way, quick and decisive leadership from the USG/ERC in the initial phase of an emergency is critical. In consultation with UN agency and Secretariat department heads in New York, the USG /ERC may decide to visit the stricken country personally in order to assess the damage first hand, and then report back to the Secretary-General, the Security Council, donors, agencies, and NGOs on an appropriate course of action. Or she/he may deploy one of OCHA's senior managers or an OCHA Regional Disaster Response Advisor (RDRA) already in the region to the emergency site, in order to support resident UN agencies, the R/HC, and the local government in the initial assessment and response.

It has become clear from numerous evaluations of OCHA's initial response that such senior leadership is a perquisite to success. The presence of these additional senior staff can lend the necessary authority and legitimacy to build consensus for effective coordination; deal with other senior officials, especially in situations requiring access negotiations; and draw worldwide attention and resources to the aid efforts. In East Timor, for instance, despite the lack of a meaningful contingency plan to respond to the outbreak of mass destruction and violence on September 4, 1999, the Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator managed to fly into Dili by September 6, 1999, where he remained as one of only two international humanitarian representatives in East Timor until the reentry of the humanitarian community on September 20. Under his leadership, coordination was immediately established and a preliminary assessment document begun.

The ERC may also decide to deploy interdisciplinary rapid response teams or "surge capacity" to support the government and/or the R/HC in assessing the situation and coordinating the relief response.

These working-level emergency reinforcements, by providing specialized capacities or boosting existing ones in times of extreme demand, can help take strain off governments, resident UN

agencies and other organizations; focus attention on the need for extraordinary levels of coordination and contingency planning; and if necessary reorient resident agencies from their normal development focus to the different demands of disaster response.

Their timely arrival can also be critical to the success of an initial response. In the past decade, OCHA has been increasingly called upon to provide such surge capacity on very short notice to R /HCs at the outset of a new crisis, when an existing emergency intensifies or to relieve temporarily or replace a critical staff member of an existing unit. In Goma, for instance, within thirty-six hours OCHA had fielded a UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team and staff with specialized skills from nearby offices in Eritrea and Kenya, as well as from Geneva. The Assistant Emergency Relief Coordination (AERC) was on the ground within forty-eight hours. Within seventy-two hours, OCHA had a total of fourteen staff members on the ground, backed up with support from desk offices in New York and Geneva.

While OCHA in the past has drawn staff on ad hoc basis to respond to a sudden onset or deterioration in a complex emergency, the need for more systematic internal procedures has been recognized. As a result, OCHA, borrowing from the expertise of its more automated initial response to natural disasters, has also built up its own in-house capacity to deploy within twenty-four hours OCHA-trained staff, who are fully conversant with OCHA's mandate and the operational specifics of the organization, in order to establish immediate and effective coordination mechanisms in a sudden-onset emergency. Depending on the crisis, these may include information management and technology, operations, logistics, administration, and communications capacities.

Increasingly, one of their first tasks is to establish what has become known as a Humanitarian Information Center (HIC). By providing a venue for humanitarian exchange, HICs promote communication and cooperation, especially in crises involving a multitude of actors. Typically staffed by information management and data specialists borrowed from humanitarian agencies and international NGOs, HICs offer a range of products and services that make coordination and response possible. These include, but are not limited to, Internet-based data repositories containing baseline information on at-risk countries: Who? What? Where? (3Ws) databases containing vital statistics on population, internal displacement, refugee movement, and needs; country encyclopedias and digital libraries of UN reports and documents; road maps to assist relief convoys and missions; and thematic maps illustrating key sectorial data including housing damage, schools and clinics, and the location of mines. HICs also often provide humanitarian aid workers with accessible, central meeting rooms, common office equipment and announcement boards as well as Internet and fax access.

3. *Common tools for natural disasters and complex emergencies, which build on the comparative advantage of the others without losing their ability to be applied in unique situations*

The international humanitarian community has increasingly recognized the need to have at its disposal a range of flexible and integrated emergency response tools that can be used in either complex emergency or natural disaster situations. OCHA, based on its experiences over the years and the increasing demands of its partners, is increasingly attempting to provide the international humanitarian community with an integrated menu of emergency response tools, which include the following subjects.

United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC)

Originally designed to provide assessment capacity and support for the coordination of incoming relief at the site of sudden-onset natural disaster, UNDAC teams are drawn from a roster of volunteer national emergency managers, who are nominated and funded by more than forty participating countries, together with staff from OCHA, UN agencies, and other international organizations. They can be deployed within twelve to twenty-four hours anywhere in the world and are capable of performing a variety of tasks, including assessment, coordination, and information management, as well as providing experts in specialized fields of disaster management, such as search and rescue, chemical spill management, and infrastructural engineering.

Until very recently UNDAC was used primarily as a natural disaster response mechanism. Since 1993, it has also been deployed in response to complex emergencies, and UNDAC continues to strengthen its capacity to respond to these types of situations.

International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG)

At the same time, OCHA recognizes the benefit of retaining the unique nature and purpose of some specialized response mechanisms. To that end, OCHA continues to help mobilize international urban search and rescue (SAR) teams, who specialize in rescuing victims trapped by rubble. They are drawn from a network of government-provided experts known as INSARAG. Additionally, in cooperation with the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), OCHA facilitates the deployment of rapid response teams with environmental expertise to coordinate the UN emergency response to environmental emergencies, such as chemical or oil spills and forest fires.

On-Site Operations Coordination Centers (OSOCC)

The rapid establishment—usually by UNDAC or the first international search and rescue team on the ground—of a temporary OSOCC at the site of a disaster can help provide a locus for information management and sharing as well as the coordination of various aid actors, particularly when infrastructure or communication facilities are lacking. But although initially conceived of to assist local authorities of the affected country in managing the disaster, in particular to coordinate international search and rescue teams, OSOCCs have proved valuable in their flexibility and adaptability to various situations and needs.

Internet-based virtual OSOCCs can also be used in both complex emergency and natural disasters to exchange information, identify needs, and plan ongoing responses in real time from anywhere in the world. Virtual OSOCCs proved vital in the initial response to earthquakes in El Salvador, India, and Peru, as well as in Afghanistan.

Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC)

In crises in which there is a peacekeeping mission already in place or in which militaries are heavily involved in the humanitarian response, OCHA staff, sometimes based in HICs, will often liaise with CIMIC staff attached to various militaries or peacekeeping operations in order to ensure the complementarity of peacekeeping and humanitarian programming and to share vital security information. They also help facilitate the most effective use of military and civil defense assets in humanitarian operations by promoting interaction between the humanitarian and military cells of a relief operation. In most cases, individual UN agencies and the larger NGOs establish their own links with military cells. However, in some instances, OCHA will serve as the hub for the mobilization and deployment of these assets and act as a direct liaison between humanitarian and military cells during a humanitarian relief operation. In this case, OCHA identifies personnel experienced in civil-military coordination to work closely with the R/HC.

UN Joint Logistics Centers (UNJLC)

OCHA may also assist in the establishment of UNJLCs where logistical information, data about the estimated global need for food and nonfood items, and information about distribution of relief to beneficiaries is exchanged and shared with the humanitarian community. For example, during the response to the flood in Mozambique in early 2001, OCHA’s Military and Civil Defense Unit (MCDU) participated in establishing a joint logistics center to coordinate the use of military planes, boats, and communications equipment for rescue, water purification, food distribution, and shelter activities.

Physical Assets

It goes without saying that the rapid deployment of emergency aid items is critical to meeting the needs of the affected population. But when contingency plans are lacking or the emergency is entirely unpredicted, it can take days for relief organizations to reposition stocks. Recognizing the need for instant access to relief supplies, the UN, with support from key donors, has established a permanent renewable stock of donated disaster relief items at the UN Humanitarian Response Depot in Brindisi, Italy, which includes tents, blankets, kitchen sets, generators, water purification /distribution equipment, and tools. Together with the World Food Program (WFP), which administers the depot, OCHA organizes the immediate transport free of charge of these basic nonfood survival items to disaster-affected areas, subject to the donor agreement and availability.

OCHA also maintains a database of relief sources for use by the broader humanitarian community. Designed to function as humanitarian yellow pages, the Central Register includes a list of stockpiles for noncommercial equipment and supplies, directories for search and rescue teams, national emergency response offices, a register of available military and civil defense assets, and a roster of disaster management experts. This enables emergency response staff to identify and approach quickly the potential providers of the required international assistance.

4. *Emergency funding mechanisms that ensure money is readily available and easily dispersed*

It goes without saying that an effective response to sudden-onset emergencies and disasters depends heavily on the availability of funds to support immediate action. The willingness of donors to fund such response is often high, largely because when compared to protracted emergencies, the immediate needs of an initial response are more easily defined, direct life-saving results are more visible, and public pressure to act is at its greatest. But, in its efforts to capitalize on this fact, the international humanitarian community faces two main challenges.

The first is to provide donors accurately and quickly with interagency funding and needs assessments. In natural disaster situations, this is typically accomplished by including funding needs, determined jointly by the resident agencies on the basis of rapid assessments, in its situation reports, which begin being issued within the first twenty-four hours of a crisis.

In a new complex emergency situation, the mechanisms for immediately communicating needs to donors are less clear. Typically, ad hoc “flash appeals” or “donor alerts” covering needs for one month may be issued within the first few weeks of a new crisis. As the crisis evolves, the initial requirements presented in flash appeals or donor alerts are subsequently incorporated into the more formal CAP.

In support of broader humanitarian objectives, OCHA also provides emergency cash grants of up to $50,000 from its own reserves to meet immediate, specific relief needs, such as the purchase and transport of blanket, tents, and tools; manages a Trust Fund for Disaster Relief for life-saving activities; and often acts as a channel for bilateral donor contributions in sudden-onset natural disasters.

5. ***Well-developed information management networks through which accurate-as-possible data are immediately available to key decision makers***

Although vital to coordination throughout an emergency, the role of information technology and management initial response is increasingly being recognized by a wide spectrum of policy and decision makers as being the most vital at the outset of a crisis, when accurate, timely data are needed to make time-sensitive decisions. Technological advances, as well as the increased expectations they generate among ourselves and the public at large, are in part responsible for this dilemma. As television and satellite transmissions increasingly focus public attention on poverty and suffering through real-time images of the victims of disaster and conflict across the globe, we face greater pressure to respond not within weeks, but within days or hours. Indeed, it is not uncommon for journalists to reach the scene of a disaster and start broadcasting before we do. In short, humanitarian actors must ensure that accurate information rises quickly to top decision makers.

Although the first task of the R/HC, with support from rapid deployment or assessment teams, is to survey the situation quickly and define the needs and type of assistance required, doing so in a both timely and accurate manner can be challenging, especially in the deep field. Information flow in an emergency is often limited by the lack of national information management capacity, limited access, damaged communication systems, insecurity, and poor communication among actors, all of which can lead to isolated decision making on the basis of disparate analysis.

All too often, when a crisis erupts, valuable time is wasted gathering baseline information about an affected area, which is often already available by the internet. Even more troubling are the instances in which our greatest challenge is not the *lack* of information but rather too much of it from too many, sometimes conflicting sources—making it difficult to discern the most critical and relevant data from the not so useful. Just as the uncoordinated arrival of relief supplies can clog a country's logistics and distributions system, the onslaught of unwanted, inappropriate, and unpackaged information can impede decision making and rapid response to an emergency.

These challenges highlight the need for more systematic ways to process and standardize information, as well as to begin information gathering and sharing on vulnerable countries well in advance of crises.

At the most basic level, OCHA does this by issuing situation reports on the overall humanitarian situation in country. These situation reports chronicle information on changes in the humanitarian situation, loss of life, material damage, national response, agency response, relief needs by sector and region, and the resultant funding appeals. Before on-site actors are able to develop or adjust their Common Humanitarian Action Plan and present comprehensive funding needs, these situation reports serve as vital conduit for communicating to donors the scope of the needs. They are ideally informed by the individual or joint assessments, the R/HC typically issues these reports at least daily, and often twice a day, during the first few days of a crisis and then weekly or biweekly as the crisis becomes less acute. The reports are shared with the host government of the affected country, the UN system on the ground, donor embassies, and with the NGO community.

Time-critical documents such as these used to be distributed by fax, telex, and cable. Today they are available to these partners and the public through two OCHA information-sharing platforms, the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN, www.irinnews.org) and ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int). The former is a humanitarian news service that provides unbiased reporting on humanitarian crises through updates, analysis, and alerts on a range of political, economic, and social issues on forty-six countries in Africa and eight in Central Asia. The latter provides, via the Web, twenty-four-hour coverage of relief, preparedness, and prevention activities for complex emergencies and natural disasters worldwide and acts as a gateway to documents and other sources of information related to humanitarian assistance and relief.

As part of its efforts to provide a more integrated response through all phases of a crisis, OCHA also deploys information specialists to the field as a part of its surge capacity or rapid response teams. Similarly, information management, as opposed to technology, is increasingly being recognized as a core function of UNDAC.

At the more sophisticated level, OCHA information managers also support initial response by working closely with their humanitarian partners to develop information products and tools, such as geographical and thematic maps, databases and digital reference libraries, and virtual coordination centers that improve the coordination of humanitarian assistance. In particular, much work remains to be done in the critical area of identifying cost-effective and simple technologies that work in the deep field, from which information is often most scarce.

6. ***Reviews that draw the lessons learned from each response and help them apply them to the next***

When all is said and done, continued improvements in the initial response to crises depends largely on the extent to which the lessons learned in one situation are both recorded and then applied in similar contexts. To this end, lesson-learning reviews can help identify strengths and weaknesses in international response coordination mechanisms and ensure that lessons identified are integrated into future contingency planning and coordination structures. Given the need for actors to focus on the work at hand, so-called real-time exercises may be less appropriate in the context of an initial response but should be undertaken almost routinely at the end of each emergency activity. These need not be full-fledged and lengthy exercises; important to their success is a relatively light design, one that uses a method that facilitates joint learning and provides instant feedback.

OCHA is fully committed to such systematic reviews of lessons learned for all its emergency activities and is currently experimenting with different modalities for such reviews—one of the first being lessons review of the 2002 Goma earthquake. Clearly the usefulness of these reviews depends very much on the interest and will of participants—staff and key partners alike—to genuinely reflect on what work and what did not and to identify workable recommendations for future activities. Over time OCHA hopes to distill lessons from these country-specific exercises and review their broad validity for similar activities and complex emergency situations.

Another way to identify lessons are external evaluations undertaken by independent consultants. In 2001, for example, OCHA asked independent evaluators to analyze its performance in response to the 2000 Gujarat earthquake, address some broader issues about the efficacy of the UN system's disaster-response capacity and to identify lessons for future activities. Similarly, OCHA also commissioned an independent evaluation of its response to the East Timor crisis in 2000. Both exercises produced sound and transparent basis for reviewing OCHA's performance.

However, unless such individual activity or country-specific exercises are systematically reviewed for their potential application in similar activities, fully incorporated into institutional memory and applied in policy- and decision making, their usefulness is limited. Recognizing this challenge, OCHA recently created an Evaluation Studies Unit within its Policy and Studies Development Branch and is in the process of putting in place an evaluative framework and strategy, in consultation with its key partners.

The strategy recognizes the evaluation activities provide little added value, if their recommendations and lessons are not applied in current and future programming, as well as policy

and decision making. To that end, OCHA's strategy aims also to create and/or improve systems for sharing the results of evaluations and reviews in a meaningful way, and to establish follow-up mechanisms.

Conclusion

Through this combination of shared experience, the international humanitarian community has made great strides in its efforts to create a common platform of response practices and tools. Overall, it is reacting more quickly and in a more coordinated manner to bring relief to the victims of disasters and emergencies. But as the war on terrorism and other sources of conflict continue, we are certain to face ever increasing and perhaps unanticipated challenges in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. To that end, we must look beyond improvements in how we respond to crisis. We must learn to be quicker and detect and prepare for crises before they occur. The earlier we intervene, the more likely we are to have a meaningful impact on the ground. Similarly, we must more consistently enter all crisis situations with a clearly defined and viable exit strategy that guides all of our actions, even in the initial response, toward the ultimate stability and recovery of the affected country.

Greater advocacy efforts before, during, and after an acute crisis can also help us to better harness public and political attention, especially in the early days of the crisis when international attention is the highest. The very fluidity of the situations in which we work has focused us to remain flexible, and that has led to many improvements in our response. In the coming years, we must continue to demonstrate the same level of versatility and ability to learn from our past interventions so that we may ultimately save more lives.