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Landscape at the epicentre of an earthquake: Rostaq, northern Afghanistan

## Disaster in conflict zone Earthquake claims 4,500 lives in Afghanistan

PHOTO: © TERRANCE WHITE/FPF/GAMMA

*Over 4,500 people died in the earthquake that struck a remote part of northern Afghanistan on February 4. The quake, which registered 5.6 on the Richter scale, had its epicentre in the poor mountainous region of Rostaq. In the aftermath, some 30,000 survivors had to face appalling winter conditions without food, drinking water or a roof over their heads.*

The first reports of this major disaster reached humanitarian aid organisations in the main cities three days later — rather fast considering the time of year and remoteness of the region. A first handful of aid workers left immediately to assess the damage. That first group was also the last to reach the disaster area for almost two weeks. The problem for emergency aid workers was the difficulty getting there. Road convoys from Mazar-y-Shariff, Kabul and Faizabad faced two enormous obstacles: winter and war.

Planes could not find the airstrips through the thick soup of clouds hanging among the mountains. Jeeps had to fight their way through the debris of houses, landslides and mud to get to remote villages. The few aid workers who did get to the scene — including ECHO Medical Coordinator Sandrine Chopin — had to face the crisis almost empty-handed. Bringing in supplies, whether by road or air, was a nightmare.

One of the current frontlines is near to Rostaq, in the Bangi area. On one side, there is the Kunduz pocket, held by the Taliban militia. On the other side, there is Taloqan, held by opposition forces, led by Ahmed Shah Massoud.

### Meagre infrastructure destroyed

Wars seldom stop to take natural disasters into account. Disasters can even be seen as opportunities to thwart an opponent. Afghanistan has been the theatre of an internal power struggle involving neighbouring countries since 1979. Its meagre infrastructure has been destroyed in the process.

In the poor mountain area of Rostaq, life has never been easy, even by the standards of Afghanistan, one of the least developed countries in the world. Lodged between the High Pamirs and the Hindukush moun-

### CRISIS IN KOSOVO

As we went to press, Slobodan Milosevic, federal Yugoslav president, faced mounting international pressure to end the conflict with ethnic Albanians in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo. He was asked to withdraw special police units from Kosovo, start a dialogue and allow humanitarian organisations access. Over 80 ethnic Albanians have been killed since February 28, when Serbian forces launched attacks on villages allegedly used by the Kosovo Liberation Army as bases. The crackdown sparked an exodus from the area, as well as demonstrations in the capital, Pristina, and world-wide. Some 90 per cent of Kosovo's population is ethnic Albanian. The European Union has chosen former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez as special envoy to Kosovo. ECHO is monitoring the situation.

tains, Rostaq is marked by Siberian winters and frequent earthquakes. Passes are among the highest in the world, and much of the region is cut off from the outside world between December and February.

Struggling to squeeze a meagre livelihood out of the barren ground, villagers have to brave potholed dirt tracks and a frontline to reach the nearest big city,

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# El Niño:

## turning the world's weather upside down

At least 44 people have died in deadly mudslides on the coast of Ecuador since the end of last year.

The mudslides came after floods that destroyed some 3,500 kilometres of road. The country's Alacama Desert is blooming with flowers thriving on unexpected rain. Meanwhile, in the South Pacific, there is drought, causing widespread hunger in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, as well as water shortages in Java. In Africa, Rift Valley fever, spread by mosquitoes thriving in stagnant flood pools, has claimed more than 450 lives in Kenya's flood-stricken North Eastern province and southern Somalia.

Behind the chaos, there is a pattern: the El Niño phenomenon. Peruvian fishermen were the first to recognise a flow of unusually warm water off their coast just around Christmas. They nicknamed it El Niño, literally, the little boy, or Christ child in Spanish. El Niño is a vast warm current, said to be roughly the size of Europe, that forms in the Pacific Ocean near the Equator every three to seven years, disrupting weather patterns worldwide. In 1992, El Niño was blamed for 2,000 deaths and losses estimated at \$13 billion. The current El Niño is expected to be the worst in history.

### Drastic measures

The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has rushed through humanitarian aid worth ECU 4.1 million for victims of El Niño in Andean countries this year. The funding is enabling European non-governmental organisations to carry out emergency aid programmes in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, providing food and medical aid, temporary shelter and water and sanitation over the next six months. In Peru alone, the National Institute of Civil Defence estimates El Niño has claimed at least 137 lives, and affected well over 110,000 people in other ways. Vast numbers of houses and fields have been destroyed in 13 provinces that have been declared disaster areas. 'Drastic situations deserve drastic measures and a certain amount of ingenuity,' says Tom Dodd, ECHO desk officer for Somalia and Kenya, where huge flood areas became completely inaccessible to aid workers. Médecins sans Frontières-Belgium responded by chartering boats to carry

### Mudslides in Peru

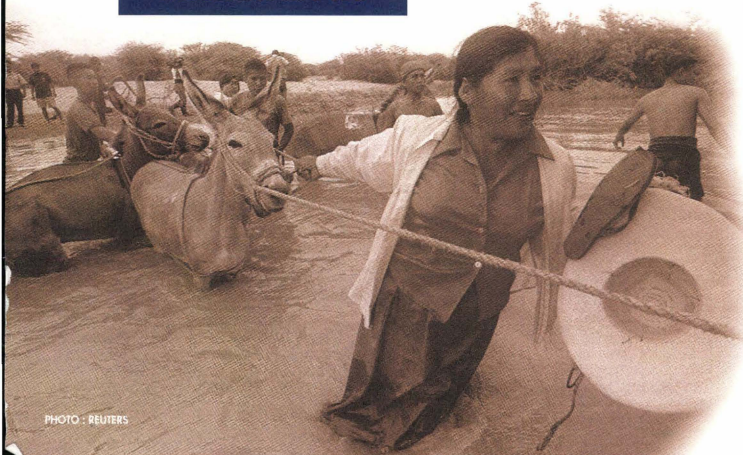


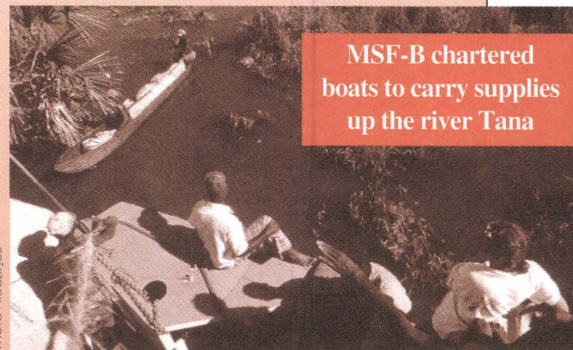
PHOTO: REUTERS

### BY BOAT OR BY PLANE, THE ONLY MEANS OF RESCUE IN KENYA

Floods in the desert – that was the startling landscape in eastern Kenya and Somalia this February. Heavy rains, normal during the short rainy season, turned into a deluge. Rivers merged, turning desertlands into shallow lakes.

Ironically, MSF-Belgium was based in Wajir at the time, working on a sanitation project to relieve the effects of drought. Reports of flooding started pouring in from the region – communities cut off, bewildered wildlife attacking people on the move. With the backing of MSF's emergency pool, the team carried out aerial reconnaissance missions throughout the east of Kenya – it was the only way to find out what was happening. The city of Wajir was completely cut off and submerged. Wells and latrines had flooded, contaminating drinking water with sewage. Diarrhoea, cholera and other water-borne diseases became a threat. Malaria threatened to get out of hand too. A logistician and nurse were sent on an urgent mission to chlorinate wells and boost availability of health care. Reconnaissance missions also identified a potential disaster in the making in a third area. The Tana River had burst its banks, flooding surrounding farmland. People were leaving their villages, wading waist-deep through the water to reach higher ground. 'I realised that I had to find boats somewhere,' said Eve Lemaire of

MSF-Belgium. 'So I asked a senior officer in the Kenyan Navy if he could ship supplies from Mombasa to the mouth of the Tana river. Then I arranged for boats to wait for us there. It wasn't exactly plain sailing from there. Once on the river, we got to a bridge we could not pass. Tonnes of supplies had to be transferred onto a lorry, then back onto the boat. We ran a shuttle, responding to reports of cholera outbreaks. We were lucky we managed to reach those affected before a serious epidemic broke out. On the river, you have to live by the tides. Sometimes high tide was at three in the morning, sometimes at three in the afternoon. There were swarms of mosquitoes. We were lucky no aid workers contracted malaria or even Rift Valley fever, another disease spread by mosquitoes. And then there were the crocodiles, watching in case anyone fell overboard...'



MSF-B chartered boats to carry supplies up the river Tana

PHOTO: ROGER JOB

supplies up the river Tana in Kenya to reach villages cut off by water. ECHO's disaster preparedness and prevention programmes try to prepare people at risk. Loss of life and damage to property can be reduced with the right kind of planning. In the case of El Niño, this may mean working out which region will be struck next. Professor Debarati Guha-Sapir of the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at the Catholic University of Louvain says self-help is best: 'The best action an international programme could take would be to strengthen the capacity of local organisations to respond in case of major disaster, and to reinforce early warning and information dissemination systems for the community.' ECHO is currently launching its regional disaster preparedness programmes in South East Asia, Central America and the Caribbean. ECHO and CRED have also organised a regional consultation in South East Asia to discuss priorities in the region. El Niño is high on the agenda. Activities such as support to community organisations along the Mekong river basin will be explored as an essential part of the programme. Preparing for El Niño is difficult, as the effects are so unpredictable, Professor Sapir points out. Side effects too are troublesome – for instance, flooding raises the likelihood of mud slides, and boosts the mosquito population, leading to diseases such as malaria or Rift Valley fever. Cholera becomes a hazard too. Drought raises the incidence of forest fires, kills cattle and depresses crop yields. Those affected worst are those least able to withstand such hardship: poor farmers, women and children. Out at sea, the marine ecosystem suffers. Fish

move off to cooler waters, or die as a result of unexpected heat. Those who depend on fish for a livelihood suffer as a consequence. 'Being prepared is a full-time job,' said Juan Luis Dominguez, about to take up a post as ECHO coordinator in Colombia. 'With El Niño, you never know what to expect. Environmental experts are surprised by the intensity of its effects in some regions, and its absence in others. This causes havoc when trying to co-ordinate humanitarian projects.' At a conference in Harare last September, climate experts concluded there was a high risk of drought in Zambia, Zimbabwe, southern Mozambique, Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa in the early part of 1998. So far, so good: no drought yet. 'We are still watching and waiting,' says Belen Martinez, member of ECHO's staff working on the response to El Niño.

### ONE VOICE

The Commission's action plan for El Niño is co-ordinated into three stages: disaster preparedness, rapid response to immediate needs, and rehabilitation followed by development where required. The European Commission has recently set up an inter-service group, co-chaired by the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and Directorate General for Development (DGVIII), in close collaboration with the Directorate General for External Relations (DG IB). Its role is to co-ordinate response to El Niño's disruptive effects. As Belen Martinez, desk officer and co-ordinator for El Niño's response team, says: 'The Commission is speaking clearly with one voice'. It is also trying to forecast funding needs. An ECHO office has been recently set up in Quito, Ecuador to monitor the effects of El Niño in Latin America.



# ECHO's global reach

**SUDAN**

## RENEWED FIGHTING IN THE SOUTH

At the end of January, a major offensive was launched in northern Bahr el Ghazal by the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) against the government of the Muslim fundamentalist and militarist National Islamic Front (NIF), in power since 1989. The civil war in Sudan, since 1983, has been a destabilising influence on the region, but this latest attack has meant that an estimated 100,000 - 150,000 civilians fled and remain without sufficient access to food and water. Furthermore, attempts to supply relief funds were severely disrupted by the government decision to ban all humanitarian flights to Bahr el Ghazal and Great Lakes region during most of February. Even now access to the worst affected locations remains greatly restricted. The main warring parties of the government of Sudan (GOS) and the SPLA have continually tried to exert control over humanitarian operations, making distribution of vital supplies difficult and dangerous. Organisations funded by ECHO in the region, in particular UNICEF, Médecins sans Frontières and Save the Children, are currently trying to adapt their ongoing programmes to the new circumstances and needs of the area. Within the ECHO 1998-9 global plan budget of ECU 11.8 million is a reserve specifically designed to respond to these kind of emergencies. ECHO will continue to monitor the situation.

**ALGERIA**

## SAHRAWI REFUGEES STILL DEPENDENT ON AID

The appointment of James Baker, former US Secretary of State, as special envoy for Western Sahara in March 1997 has led to renewed discussions between Morocco and the Polisario Front on the implementation of the self-determination referendum. Fighting between the two sides since 1975, when the former Spanish colony was handed over to Morocco and Mauritania, (and the Polisario Front refused to recognise the agreement) led to the Sahrawi people fleeing to the Tindouf area in Algeria. Although the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara is in the process of drawing up a draft plan to repatriate voters for the referendum scheduled for December this year, the first wave of repatriations will not begin until September. An estimated 150,000 refugees will remain wholly dependent on international humanitarian aid for food, sanitation, basic medical care and the supply of drinking water. Funds totalling ECU 7.2 million have recently been approved, of which ECU 6.22 million is for food aid and the rest is to be used for medical assistance and the continuation of the water-supply scheme.

**EX-YUGOSLAVIA**

## HOPE FOR BOSNIA, BUT NEED FOR SAFETY NET

The political situation seems to be improving in Bosnia-Herzegovina. If the new pro-Dayton government of the Republika Srpska keeps its promises, the return of refugees and displaced, who at present still remain marginal in this part of the country, could become a reality and unwind the tangled situation of the displaced population. But this glimmer of hope is still not reflected by improvements in the daily life of many people, particularly the displaced and vulnerable groups such as the elderly and infirm, who are dependent on humanitarian aid to survive. There is still no social security in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and ECHO must continue to play a role as 'safety net' for these groups. At the same time, the Office seeks to establish, through these projects, structures which eventually can become autonomous. ECHO also finances projects which aim to bring back those displaced to their villages, in order to free up urban dwellings and encourage the return of refugees who are still living in great numbers abroad. ECHO is continuing to provide assistance to those in need in Croatia and in Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in particular to refugees and displaced. ECHO has prepared a global plan of ECU 81 million for ex-Yugoslavia, of which 80 percent will go to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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## Disaster in conflict zone

# Earthquake claims 4,500 lives in Afghanistan



Military air base used by UN planes to load personnel and supplies

Mazar-y-Shariff. Transport may mean an old Volga car, a donkey or mule, or hitching a ride on a passing truck. Survival is a continuous fight to set enough food aside to prepare for winter. The earthquake struck at the end of winter, with food stocks and temperatures at lows. Entire villages were buried under landslides. Meagre food stocks were destroyed. Road links were cut.

ECHO made available ECU 1.75 million for this Afghan earthquake disaster. The International Committee of the

Red Cross took on the role of coordinating the relief operation, and Médecins sans Frontières-Belgium looked after medical aid. The first relief supplies finally reached Rostaq nearly two weeks after the disaster, together with new shifts of aid workers to relieve the first teams on the spot, who were by then exhausted. For them, it had been just another assignment. Barely a week later, another earthquake hit the same region. ECHO's John Hayward went to the disaster area. Fortunately, this time there was little damage done.

## EU LARGEST DONOR FOR AFGHANISTAN

Since 1993, ECHO has contributed ECU 71 million to the victims of the conflict in Afghanistan. In 1997, due to renewed fighting, ECHO increased its presence in the north of Afghanistan. In December 1997, the European Commission approved ECU 3.8 million for a special 'winter programme', which comprised the distribution of food, blankets and coal to go to more extreme regions and the people most at risk from the very low temperatures. Its activities have helped both the areas under control of the Taliban and the areas under the North Alliance. Following the earthquake in February, ECHO channelled emergency aid worth up to ECU 1.75 million, and reserved a further ECU 17 million from the winter programme.

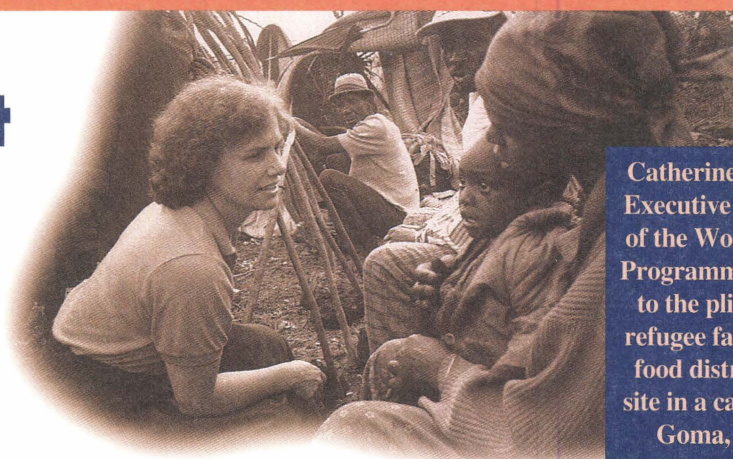


PHOTO: © TERRANCE WHITE / FSP / GAWWA

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# Food for thought

Catherine Bertini of the World Food Programme is revolutionising the delivery of food aid — by putting women first



Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, listens to the plight of a refugee family at a food distribution site in a camp near Goma, Zaire

*Humanitarian aid must focus on the people who make a difference between life and death in communities at risk: women.*

*That is the message World Food Programme Executive Director Catherine Bertini is trying to get across today.*

"We have ignored those who are most likely to make a difference in making sure people live from one day to the next, and those people are always women," she said. From her base in Rome, Bertini heads the biggest international food aid organisation in the world. The United Nations organisation has an annual budget of U.S.\$ 1.2 billion, and a staff of 4,000 involved in emergency and development operations benefiting some 45 million people in 84 countries. WFP is one of the European Community Humanitarian Office's most significant partner organisations — between 1995 and 1997, ECHO made available funding worth about ECU 120.9 million to WFP. "Women, especially in conflict areas, are the ones who find the food, grow the food, shop for the food, bring the food home, prepare the food, find the water and the firewood to cook the food, and who serve the food. If we're in this business, then it's just natural that we should

be talking to women," says Bertini. It sounds like a statement of the obvious. If it is necessary to put the case so strongly, that is because the issue only recently got priority. Bertini identified two events that prompted re-thinking at WFP. First was the United Nations Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. "We were asked to come to Beijing with concrete proposals for what we were going to do differently in future. We took a close look at how we deliver food, and who uses it, and we found we didn't have anywhere near enough emphasis on women in food aid deliveries and management of food aid systems."

## Involve women

The second event was the aftermath of genocidal massacre in Rwanda in 1994. The organisation delivered massive amounts of food to huge camps in Zaire and Tanzania, but found that community-based distribution systems in the biggest camps were very leaky. "When we analysed things further, we found a stark difference between what was delivered and what got to women... we saw a lot of food being sold along the side of the road," said Bertini. In smaller camps, where individuals were registered and took delivery of food personally, far less food was lost. WFP policy now is to involve women throughout the process. "When we don't pay attention, sometimes we make mis-

takes," she said. For instance, it may be inappropriate to deliver kernels of corn (maize) that need to be ground to make meal, or cooked for hours to make it edible. A very practical example: Bertini recently visited an Angolan community cultivating land that had been de-mined. "The women said: 'we're working, but we don't have the right tools'." Bertini found this hard to understand, as it was clear that a non-governmental organisation had duly delivered tools. They had, but it became clear that the hoes sent were considered men's hoes. Men work in Angola's fields standing upright, with hoes on long handles. Women use hoes attached to much shorter handles, and work bent over while carrying babies on their backs. Women do most of the work in the field. "There is so much we need to learn — just by asking, we learn these things." Making food available can have spin-offs benefiting women in long-lasting ways. One of Bertini's favourite programmes is in Pakistan, where a family gets a litre of oil for every month a girl goes to school. "The can of oil is worth as much as half a month's salary for a man. It's increased the number of girls in school threefold." WFP's new policy is influencing recruitment throughout the organisation too over the five years in which Bertini has been executive director. When she arrived, just 17 percent of the staff were female. Now the organisation is up to 29 percent, not just at lower levels, but throughout the structure.

## March 8th, 1998: International Women's Day Campaign

# A flower for the women of Kabul

*Women worldwide responded to an appeal to dedicate March 8, International Women's Day, to the women of Afghanistan. The appeal, launched at the European Parliament and supported by Commissioner Emma Bonino, was intended to highlight the issue of human rights, particularly women's rights, denied to Afghan women today.*

The aim of the ongoing campaign is to convince the governments of United Nations members to put pressure on all parties in Afghanistan to restore basic human rights for women and to allow humanitarian aid to be delivered without discrimination.

**Oliviero Toscani, best known as the Benetton fashion photographer, contributed this image to the campaign**



The response on the day itself was enormous, with actions that included the collection of signatures for an appeal, round tables, exhibitions and so forth. Médecins du Monde, for instance, organised an exhibition of photographs entitled 'Behind the Veil: women of Afghanistan', illustrating daily life for women in Kabul today. The exhibition

Hello!  
Mr and Mrs Frenchman, How are you?  
My name is Shakiba Rahmana and I  
come from a family of five.  
I would very much like to leave  
Afghanistan.  
I do not like to sit down and stare at only  
the wall.  
In Afghanistan, we have no university,  
no television, no radio, no life.  
We live like a sheep on a farm.  
My house is like a prison, a cemetery.  
To remain in an Afghanistan that I do  
not like makes me miserable, poor,  
alone and sad...  
I have no money. If I were a pigeon, I  
would fly to France.

This letter was shown at the photo exhibition  
"Behind the veil: women of Afghanistan"

is currently being shown in venues throughout Europe. At the Brussels opening in March, Commissioner Bonino said: "Remember the plight of Afghan women on March 8, but do not forget them on the 9th."

She added: "Those who say that we cannot change the system are wrong. Provided public opinion knows about the injustice these women are suffering, then we can and will do something. If we can't, what right have we to call ourselves the developed world?"

### In Taliban-held areas of Afghanistan today:

- ↳ Women have to wear an all-enveloping chadari to go out in public. They have to be accompanied by a male relative.
- ↳ Women are not allowed to work outside their homes.
- ↳ Women and girls are not allowed to attend schools or universities.
- ↳ Access to healthcare for women and girls is limited to that available in the few women-only hospitals and health centres.
- ↳ Music, television and wedding celebrations are banned.
- ↳ Men have to wear beards, and have their heads covered at all times.