



Echo News

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Earthquake brings more misery to Afghanistan

Still facing huge humanitarian needs after years of war and recent crippling droughts, Afghanistan suffered a new misfortune in March when the area around Nahrin, in the north of the country, was struck by a powerful earthquake.

Eight hundred people were killed, and many more lost their homes. ECHO responded promptly, authorising its partners to despatch tents, blankets and shelter kits already stocked in the region to the crisis zone. This was followed by a post-emergency aid decision for more than €2 million. The focus is on rebuilding homes which have been destroyed or seriously damaged, and on rehabilitating schools, clinics and wells.

The new decision came shortly after the adoption of a funding package of more than €17 million to ensure continued assistance for vulnerable groups affected by the civil war, drought and conflict in different regions of Afghanistan.

These operations will concentrate mainly on the centre, north and west of the country. **continued on page 2**

Humanitarian consequences of the Middle East conflict

The cycle of violence and retaliation between the Israeli army and Palestinians has had a dramatic impact on the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories. As the escalating crisis affects all aspects of daily life, international relief efforts are more vital than ever. In response to the unfolding tragedy, the European Commission has recently taken two humanitarian aid decisions totalling €8.5 million, bringing its contribution to the current Middle East crisis to more than €45 million.

After more than 19 months of continued violence and unpredictable border closures between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza, there has been a dramatic escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since late March 2002. The re-occupation of West Bank towns by the Israeli army, accompanied by a strict non-entrance policy, has worsened the already difficult living conditions of the Palestinian people, posing great risks to public health. Movement restrictions on medical staff, patients and ambulances have impeded the provision of emergency health services to the needy while widespread damage to generators, electricity, phone lines and water supplies, together with transport restrictions, have led to shortages of food, water, electricity and medicines.

In direct response to the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, ECHO recently mobilised €3.5 million in emergency humanitarian aid. This will help meet the needs of vulnerable Palestinian families particularly in devastated Jenin, in Ramallah where the hospital faces a serious shortage of medicines and in many villages which have been cut off during military intervention.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), along with seven of ECHO's experienced NGO partners in the region, will distribute food, medicines, medical supplies, **continued on page 2**

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Given the acute needs in terms of food security, ECHO's partners will undertake operations to improve the nutritional status of the worst affected groups. Shelter and other non-food items are also being provided to vulnerable families. Primary health care is being targeted, with a series of projects aimed at improving the health status of the population.

Commenting on the latest aid decisions, Poul Nielson, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid said: "More than twenty years of conflict, coupled with droughts and earthquakes, have exacted a terrible cost in human misery with homes destroyed, health and education systems left in ruins and huge numbers of people displaced from their home areas. Through its previous interventions, and these latest decisions, the Commission is at the forefront of efforts to provide relief to the Afghan population".

Since 1999, ECHO has provided almost €100 million in humanitarian funding for Afghanistan.

hygiene kits, cooking fuel and other basic essentials. They are also helping to restore clean water supplies and boost professional medical coverage.

To strengthen the logistic capacity of ICRC, six Land Cruiser ambulances have already been airlifted from Brussels (with non-Palestinian number plates). They will go some way to replacing the 10 ICRC and Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) ambulances that have been damaged beyond repair in the conflict.

Continuing commitment

This latest financing decision, taken at the end of April, follows a €5 million decision adopted on 2 April which focuses on supporting the most vulnerable Palestinians in both the West Bank/Gaza and Lebanon.

In the West Bank/Gaza area, ECHO's partner NGOs will work to strengthen emergency health care in isolated areas and to improve the mental and physical/nutritional wellbeing particularly of women, children and the disabled.

As the water and electricity supplies of many villages and towns in the Palestinian Territories have been badly hit, the decision will also finance the installation of rainwater collection cisterns in seven West Bank villages. This will improve the availability of clean drinking water and limit the risk of waterborne diseases.

Within the Palestinian Territories, one of the biggest problems has been gaining access to the victims of the fighting.

In Lebanon an estimated 380,000 refugees, are living in miserable conditions in 12 overcrowded refugee camps, displacement centres and unregistered gatherings. Unemployment levels are high and the health situation is poor, aggravated by problems relating to water, sanitation and sewage waste disposal. There is also a higher than average incidence

of physical and mental handicap. ECHO is therefore funding programmes to improve hygiene in the refugee camps and displacement centres in Lebanon. The most vulnerable Palestinian refugees in five camps will also receive material assistance and professional training, enabling them to support themselves and their families.

A further crucial component involves financing the supply of medicines and emergency equipment to PRCS hospitals and the upgrading of their services. This will enable the hospitals which, along with UNRWA are the sole providers of medical services to the Palestinian refugees, to continue to deliver low-cost medical care.

In addition to the humanitarian aid channelled through ECHO, the European Commission announced, in April, an extra €5 million in food aid in response to an emergency appeal launched by the World Food Programme. This is on top of the €15 million already earmarked for food security operations for the Palestinian population during 2002.

Problem of access

Within the Palestinian Territories, one of the biggest problems has been gaining access to the victims of the fighting. Poul Nielson, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid has stressed that ECHO and its partners "are poised to respond to the ever worsening humanitarian crisis - but cannot do so if access is denied".

The Commissioner expressed concern "about the way in which basic principles of humanitarian law in particular regarding access to civilian casualties of the violence" were being flouted. "To ignore the inalienable rights of individuals to assistance", he said, "is an assault on fundamental human values and a step backwards for humanity".



Crossing an Israeli checkpoint in the Palestinian Territories (Kalandia)

Joas DRAY / ECHO

Increasing youth-awareness

As part of the 2001 call for project proposals to raise awareness and provide information about humanitarian aid, ECHO has chosen to make youth-awareness one of the new priorities in its communication policy. Three projects have been selected as a result.

The first, in partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP) and backed by the Italian Ministry of Education, focuses on making the 10-15 year age group more aware of the problem of hunger and starvation in the world. Some 8,000 secondary schools are currently targeted by the pilot scheme. They are being sent world maps highlighting hunger hot-spots, as well as a video, and will take part in a competition for the best article on the subject. The project received very positive media coverage at its launch together with a high level of participation.

The second, as part of the EU Spanish presidency, concerns a Farmaceuticos Sin Fronteras - España project which plans to distribute a CD-ROM and teaching pack to 8,000 schools (for 12-18 year olds) and organise a series of conferences in universities to promote a better understanding of European humanitarian aid.

ECHO is also supporting the production of a new game devised by the Belgian Red Cross. "The Tracing Game" is played in groups and involves simulating a situation that so often arises in humanitarian crises when families are split up. The object of the game is for the participants to imagine themselves as refugees and to locate lost members of their family, with the help of the Red Cross.

Fame mai più ("An End to Hunger")

This was the slogan of an awareness-raising campaign promoted by ECHO, the World Food Programme (WFP), and the Italian Ministry of Education for the 2001-2002 school year.

The idea was simple: to get Italian schoolchildren between the ages of 11 and 15 to talk about hunger in the world, and to put forward imaginative ways of solving this modern-day crisis. The starting point was to send information material to some 8,000 schools with a request to the students to become reporters and get together to write an article. The subject: their ideas for tackling world hunger and any practical experiences they may have had of solidarity actions. Hundreds of school classes wrote back, suggesting a large number of possible initiatives - ranging from sponsorship of individual children in crisis zones to support for small-scale local projects. The 19 best contributions were published in the campaign's on-line newspaper*. Representatives of ECHO, the WFP and the Italian Education Ministry met with the young writers from the two schools that tied for first place - the Robecchi di Vigeveno middle school in Pavia and the Kant High School in Rome.

Following the success of this operation, ECHO and the WFP are looking at ways of extending the approach to school pupils in other countries.

* http://www.istruzione.it/news/fame_mai_piu/index.shtml



Daily life in Kabul

Serbia: lasting solutions for refugees and displaced people

Biyana Tokovic is the mother of five children. She fled from Kosovo with her family and has lived in Nis (Southern Serbia) since June 1999, occupying the second floor of a renovated house. "Life is not always easy here", she says. "but we don't have to pay any rent thanks to the aid projects for hosting families that have been set up. We still want to return home as soon as possible—to the village in Kosovo where my parents still live."

Biyana's lodgings in Nis were made available, on a provisional basis, through a major assistance programme for host families funded since 1999 by the Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO). The aim is to help the large number of refugees and displaced people living in Serbia. Between October 2001 and May 2002, €854,000 was spent on building and renovating 680 houses in 24 Serb municipalities. ECHO's implementing partner for this operation was the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Today, the prospects of returning home look increasingly bright for the estimated 380,000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia who are still in Serbia. Those displaced from Kosovo (almost 190,000 people) still face big problems, however, given the continuing lack of security in their home areas.

Sexual exploitation of refugee children

An abuse of power of the worst kind

Save the Children has recently reported allegations of widespread sexual abuse of refugee children in West Africa. Aid workers are said to have demanded 'sexual services' in return for food, medicines and plots of land. The initial findings from a study carried out by the NGO in the region are an important starting point for further investigations aimed at establishing the scale of the problem. The ongoing inquiry is being closely followed by ECHO.

ECHO unreservedly condemns any such behaviour as an abuse of power of the worst kind. It expects its partners to make every effort to stamp out the practice and to deal adequately with this type of misconduct.

ECHO has long recognised the desperate plight of refugees living in fragile conditions and the fact that they are vulnerable to abuses of various kinds. This is why it consistently stresses the importance of increased international support and funding for protection activities and the need for a stronger international presence in the refugee camps. The issue is regularly raised by ECHO in its discussions with UNHCR and other partners.

It is crucial to have high quality staff—both expatriate and local—implementing humanitarian projects. The initial findings from Save the Children underline the need to pay even more attention to this vital aspect, and to ensure that appropriate staff training is available. This needs to be accompanied by an uncompromising approach in dealing with established cases of abuse - involving, where necessary, local law enforcement agencies.

The interests of the beneficiaries are paramount. For victims of humanitarian crises, aid is an entitlement, not a commodity to be purchased. Few groups are more vulnerable than refugee children, and "zero-tolerance" is the only way to deal with those who would seek to exploit this vulnerability to obtain sexual favours.

Globally, the subject of child protection has moved up the political agenda. This is reflected in new engagements by the international community, in particular the two Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child dealing respectively with children in armed conflict and with the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The importance of the issue was also underlined by the staging of a United Nations Special Session on the Rights of Children in New York on 8-10 May. ECHO strongly supports these international endeavours which, in conjunction with concrete and decisive action in the field, should help improve the prospects for millions of vulnerable children throughout the world.

ECHO's global reach

GLOBAL PLANS

👤 Serbia - €35.9 million

The aid is designed to help meet the immediate needs of some 500,000 refugees, displaced persons and vulnerable local people up to the beginning of 2003. It covers, in particular, the provision of food and non-food items, health care, shelter, repatriation and social integration.

👤 Tanzania - €27 million

The global plan targets approximately 500,000 refugees in Tanzania who have fled conflict in neighbouring countries. The funds will support a range of activities including the supply of food aid, the treatment of water supplies and shelter provision.

👤 Colombia - €8 million

Support for people displaced internally by the conflict in Colombia. The aid, in the form of non-food items, healthcare, psychosocial help, sanitation works and construction materials, will benefit almost 125,000 people in the coming months.

OTHER RECENT DECISIONS

👤 Afghanistan (2 decisions) - €19.135 million

€17.085m - Continuing assistance for vulnerable populations affected by drought and conflict.

€2.05m - Emergency decision in support of victims of the earthquake which struck on 25 March 2002.

👤 Palestinian populations (2 decisions) - €8.5 million

€5m - Purchase of basic food products. Development of drinking water network. Supply of medicines and essential medical equipment. Psychosocial assistance. Practical support for the most vulnerable families living in refugee camps in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.

€3.5 m - Emergency aid to Palestinian victims of the recent escalation of violence in the West Bank and Gaza. Strengthening of the medical capacity of the ICRC, the UPMRC and Ramallah Hospital.

👤 North Korea - €5.55 million

Rehabilitation and construction of drinking water and waste water treatment systems.

Salvador, 18 months on

On 13 January 2001, El Salvador was hit by a violent earthquake, followed one month later by another major tremor. This double tragedy led to widespread devastation. More than a thousand people lost their lives and 160,000 homes were destroyed. Responding to the situation, the Commission, through its Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), committed €10 million of relief aid for the victims. Eighteen months later, the support offered to the most vulnerable communities by ECHO and its partners is now helping with the development of new techniques in construction and disaster prevention.

Two days after the crisis hit, ECHO sent a team of experts to the region and took part in coordinating international aid efforts. Priority was given to the most vulnerable populations. ECHO targeted its aid at the remotest areas that were least likely to benefit from the assistance already mobilised. During the violent tremors, in regions such as Ahuachápan on the frontier with Guatemala, local people watched helpless as their homes, partly made from traditional materials, collapsed. ECHO financed the construction of around 880 temporary shelters. The shelters have provided short-term accommodation for nearly 5,000 people.

The move from emergency relief to rehabilitation, undertaken by ECHO's partners, is now well under way. In April this year, the Commission allocated €525,000 through Atlas Logistique to teach people from various municipalities how to build earthquake-proof

houses using traditional, cheap materials. This scheme should benefit the country's most underprivileged families by giving them access to more durable accommodation, guaranteeing them better protection in future.



House reconstruction in Salvador - ECHO project -

A memorable experience for Schuman Day



Children disembarking at the end of their Schuman Day trip with ECHO Flight.

Sixty disadvantaged children living in residential homes in Nairobi were given a special treat on May 9, when they took to the skies above the Kenyan capital courtesy of ECHO Flight. The demonstration flights were organised by ECHO's regional office as part of the Schuman Day celebrations to mark the founding of the European Union.

ECHO Flight has transported almost 200,000 aid workers and 5,300 tonnes of food and medical supplies to crisis zones in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region since it was set up in 1994. It provides a vital lifeline for highly vulnerable populations living in inaccessible areas affected by conflict and drought.

Mombasa, 13-19 March 2002 Results of ECHO seminar

ECHO fieldworkers and head office staff dealing with African countries attended a seminar in Mombasa on 13-19 March to review the programmes financed by ECHO on the continent. Debates focused on the management of humanitarian operations, the evaluation of medical and food aid, and the performance indicators used in analysing different programmes. Other points discussed included strategic orientations for humanitarian aid, the main changes in the proposed new Partnership Agreement, and the growing problem of conflict-related internal displacement in a number of African countries.