

## DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

# PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE



*The world conference of Yokohama on natural disaster reduction provides an occasion for ECHO to take stock of the importance of prevention and its close link with humanitarian aid.*

Since its creation in 1992, the European Community Humanitarian Office has seen its operations expand exponentially. Distress situations are increasing around the world, whether they involve natural disasters – of particular interest to us here – or are of human origin.

### **Awareness of the international community**

In 1993, the global economy committed more money to natural disasters than it devoted to development cooperation. The growth of the world's population, environmental pollution, climatic changes and unchecked industrialization make populations increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters. This multiplying of factors means that the number of dead and injured, and amount of material damage is constantly increasing.

On the other hand, warning and prevention systems, in particular for hurricanes, floods, droughts and volcanic eruptions have proven their ability to save large numbers of human lives and to significantly reduce material damage.

**Natural disasters strike blindly. In addition to loss of human life and material damage, the social, political and psychological costs are difficult to evaluate. Disasters can leave their marks for decades.**

The price to be paid for a preparedness plan is significantly lower – both in terms of human suffering and in financial terms – than for an emergency aid programme.

Slowly but surely, the international community is becoming aware that, in the long term, it is much more efficient to invest more in these prevention systems

and to integrate them into policies defined at national and regional level.

In this respect, the aim of the Yokohama conference is to remove the barriers between the many disciplines involved in disaster preparedness: engineers, public health experts, politicians, teachers, insurance companies and members of the state-financed civilian rescue organizations must be able to work together to develop a specific and integrated approach in this field.

### **What is the link with humanitarian aid ?**

The time when the actions of humanitarian organizations were considered as purely charitable exercises, implemented by kind-hearted volunteers, is past. Humanitarian aid is no longer improvised. Today, it



is a job for professionals. The success of operations depends on a rapid and precise assessment of the needs of populations in dire need. Prevention, preparation and the rapid exchange of information are the key elements to providing an immediate and accurate response. It is therefore clear that ECHO which is being called upon to play an increasingly larger role on the humanitarian scene, is interested in prevention and preparation to make its actions more effective and viable.

**In the end, the humanitarian effort in the field of prevention must be equal to (if not greater than) the effort made in the field of emergency aid actions. This is the only way of reversing the trend of a growing number of natural disasters which bring about increasingly dramatic crises.**

## **What will ECHO's role be in the field of disaster preparedness ?**

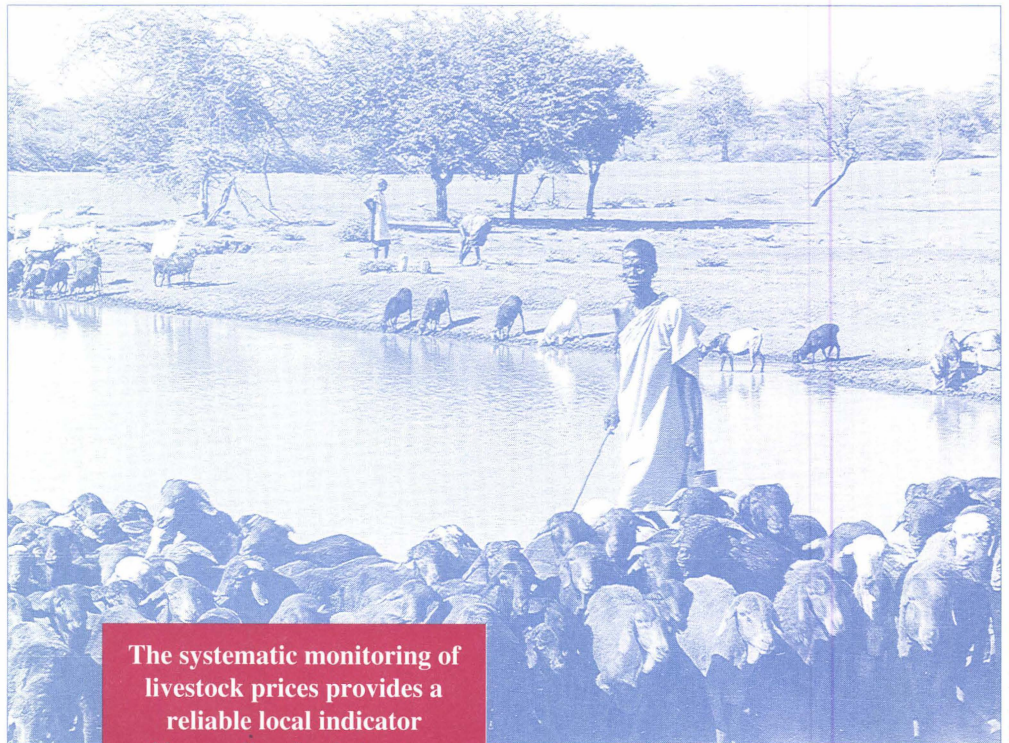
For a long time now, a large number of actors have become involved in the field of natural disaster preparedness. ECHO is a newcomer and its aim is to undertake actions complementary to those already undertaken, to provide additional strength to the organizations currently working in the field.

The European Commission has already undertaken numerous projects in the field of natural disaster preparedness, in European countries and in third countries, and has supported very diverse types of projects: a study on the impact of long-term climatic changes, the construction of houses resistant to earth tremors in Peru, a study on landslides in China, the construction of anti-cyclone shelters in Bangladesh, etc.



**To avoid chaos when massive amounts of humanitarian aid arrive, local management structures must be reinforced. This is one of ECHO's priority tasks.**

Photo: C.R.E.D.



**The systematic monitoring of livestock prices provides a reliable local indicator of impending food shortage.**

FAO photo by F. MATTOU

ECHO's mission, in the initial stage, is to gather data on the different projects in the Commission and Member States, with the aim of systematizing the available information.

Subsequently, ECHO intends to concentrate on a field of major significance for the success of the prevention actions: the education and training of local personnel in the regions at risk. This is a factor which is too often neglected in the global approach of prevention actions.

## **Maximum use of local resources**

The first to rescue the people affected by a natural disaster are the local first-aid workers. They can provide the fastest relief, most appropriate to the situation. Too

often, international organizations exclude local operators from the emergency plans implemented at national level. But, very often, these local operators have a far greater experience and knowledge of the land. One of ECHO's objectives is to identify potential local partners who, because of their close contacts with the local population, can form the best links on the ground in the event of a disaster. After identifying the local partners, ECHO will be able to provide them with the resources to enable them to acquire the best equipment and training. It will also be able to assess with them what supplies they need from international donors in the event of a disaster.

**Education, the reinforcement of organizations on the ground and the training of local communities in the countries at risk are the key elements in natural disaster preparedness: this is ECHO's priority area of action.**

## **Support for tried and tested local projects**

Populations at risk rarely have to wait long for the worst to happen. Experience has prompted them to set up local prevention mechanisms with expedient measures. These solutions which amount to simple common sense, sometimes prove to be remarkably effective. Examples include: bound banana-tree trunks which float and form an emergency raft in the event of floods in Bangladesh; or the vast nets stretched over the hills overlooking South American shanty towns to contain landslides. If these measures are effective, why not extend them to other situations which present the same risks ? ECHO intends to promote this type of low-technology project among the groups at risk. ■



# ECHO'S GLOBAL REACH

## RWANDA and BURUNDI

Rwanda is suffering a human catastrophe of staggering dimensions. Over 2 million people have been directly affected by the crisis which broke out after the double assassination of the Rwandan and Burundian presidents on

April 6th this year at Kigali airport. Since that date, massacres and civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes have caused tens of thousands of deaths. Kigali has been the scene of carnage on a horrific scale. Piles of bodies litter the streets and the risk of epidemics - cholera, dysentery, typhoid and plague - is acute. Fighting

between soldiers of the FPR, the Presidential Guard and the Rwandan

Army has spread to other regions of the country.

Before April 6th, the situation in Rwanda was already grave. A large number of displaced people were in camps in the north of the country and the south had been submerged by an enormous influx of refugees (275,000) from Burundi after the failed coup d'Etat of 21 October 1993 and the assassination of the former Burundian President, Melchior Ndadaye. In addition, at least 500,000 Rwandans were suffering from food shortages in the south of the country. The new explosion of violence struck a further blow to this small, already sorely tested country.

In Burundi, massacres of Hutus and Tutsis (the population balance in the two countries is approximately 85% Hutu, 14% Tutsi and 1% Twa) also claimed thousands of deaths at the end of 1993 but, at present, a precarious calm seems to have descended over the region. The humanitarian needs remain huge however, particularly those of people displaced inside Burundi.

In order to respond to the major humanitarian crisis in this region of Africa, ECHO has set up a large relief operation. At the end of last year, a global plan to provide aid to the Burundian refugees in the neighbouring countries (particularly Rwanda) was organized in collaboration with the UNHCR. Following the first payment of 18.3 million Ecus in December 1993, a second part of 13.5 million Ecus was released in April 1994.

At the beginning of February, 8 million Ecus in aid was allocated to Rwanda for displaced persons in the

north - there are 350,000 of them in the camps of the zone controlled by the FPR - and 500,000 Ecus have recently been released for victims of the new wave of interethnic violence.

As the situation in the region is very unstable, ECHO is monitoring events closely in order to be able to respond quickly to any new needs which may emerge.

### Partners

UNHCR - WFP - ICRC and IFRC - MSF (F), MSF (B), MSF (NL), MSF (SP), MSF (CH) in Tanzania - Action Internationale contre la Faim (F) - Pharmaciens sans Frontières - Médecins du Monde - Caritas - Oxfam (UK) - UNICEF - Handicap International (F) - CARE (UK), CARE (D), CARE International - FOCSIV

## The former YUGOSLAVIA

The unprecedented humanitarian effort continues on behalf of populations afflicted by the war in the former Yugoslavia. The Commission has just decided to provide an additional 50 million Ecus to extend the programmes currently underway and to set up new actions carried out by NGOs. 21.2 million Ecus have been earmarked for Bosnia-Herzegovina, 11.2 million Ecus for Croatia and 14.8 million Ecus for Serbia Montenegro.

### *Bosnia : medical actions*

The people of Bosnia-Herzegovina remain the main recipients of the humanitarian action because of the continuing conflict. The new decision mainly concerns medical relief (medicines, medical equipment, mobile hospitals, training). In addition, current hygiene programmes will be renewed. The prolonged conflict also creates increasingly great psychological and social needs. ECHO is funding a broad range of projects, from the social rehabilitation of refugee women to psychological assistance for children who have witnessed atrocities.

### *Croatia : a vast hygiene programme*

In Croatia, ECHO will henceforth directly oversee the distribution of hygiene parcels (soap, toothpaste, washing powder, nappies and baby products, etc.) covering the needs of all refugees and displaced persons in the Republic. The Office is continuing to provide direct food aid to these same recipients. The organizational and management capacities of the ECTF (European Community Task Force) will also be strengthened.

### *Serbia/Montenegro : extension of aid to cover the needs of the poorest*

Living conditions have become alarming in these two Republics which are being suffocated by the embargo. ECHO is increasing its aid there. Basic food products will be distributed not only to the 380,000 refugees but also to the 150,000 residents living in the worst conditions of poverty whose survival depends on it. Families sheltering refugees will continue to receive food and hygiene parcels, an action designed by ECHO to help

ease the tensions between refugees and inhabitants. The latter have felt that the refugees who have been receiving humanitarian aid because of their status, had been given preferential treatment.

## AFGHANISTAN

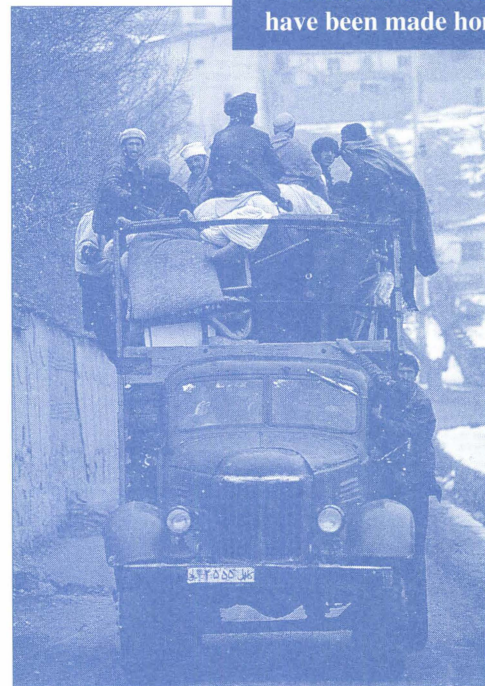
Far from the glare of the spotlights, the rival factions have continued without respite to fight for power since the departure of the last Soviet soldier. The main theatre of the fighting, Kabul, the capital, is gradually being transformed into a field of ruins. 350,000 people have lost their homes there and are being sheltered by other families. 50,000 others have found refuge in public buildings. At the beginning of January 1994, intensification of the fighting made a population already weakened by 2 years of civil war even more vulnerable. Profiting from a brief lull, thousands of people who had been trapped by the fighting succeeded in fleeing to the north (Charikar) and to the south. The latter arrived to see the Pakistani border being closed and were forced to gather in an area surrounding Jalalabad. Today, this city holds approximately 80,000 displaced people.

The Commission is one of the few donors to have released funds to provide relief to these displaced people who are condemned to wandering around their own country. Since the beginning of 1994, ECHO has dedicated 3.4 million Ecus to relief operations in Afghanistan.

### Partners

Médecins sans Frontières (F) - Médecins du Monde (F) - Avicenne (F) - CARE (FRG) - Comité International de la Croix Rouge et du Croissant Rouge afghan (International Committee of the Afghan Red Cross and Red Crescent) - UNHCR (through the Pakistani delegation) - MADERA (Mission to assist the development of rural economies in Afghanistan)

**Afghanistan, where hundreds of thousands have been made homeless.**



Gamma

**Fighting in Rwanda and Burundi has uprooted almost 2 million people.**

UNHCR

## SADAKO OGATA

High Commissioner of the United Nations for Refugees

# "The European Union, a solid partner for the UNHCR"

Since the end of the Cold War, we have been witnessing an eruption of civil conflicts in various parts of the world and, consequently, an increase in humanitarian needs. How do you see the role of the UNHCR in this new situation ?

Obviously, our role is expanding. Basically, we are not a relief organization. Our organization was established by the UN General Assembly to protect refugees. At the time, these were mainly refugees from Eastern European socialist countries. Our role was to receive and integrate them into the free democratic countries as they rarely returned home to their country of origin.

When the flow of refugees became more massive, particularly in the Third World, our role changed somewhat. We had to provide assistance which included food, medical care and education to help integrate them into the host country.

At the end of the Cold War, the emergence of civil conflicts and persecutions of all kinds led to even greater movements of people. The reception in the neighbouring countries became more temporary until conditions improved and they could return.

Relief provision (food, shelter, clothing, medical care) is a means of protecting the refugees but it is not an end in itself. However, the scale of the needs has forced the UNHCR to become more involved in aid operations, in collaboration with an increasing number of humanitarian organizations. These relief operations are an integral part of the UNHCR's mandate : to protect displaced peoples and refugees.



What is the major challenge for the UNHCR operations ?

I think that, above all, our action must be rapid and efficient. Massive displacements of populations have a destabilizing effect on neighbouring countries. Our response has to be immediate. This takes the form of setting up emergency teams which have to deal with sometimes very complex situations. Today, most refugees are fleeing war and we cannot just wait outside the borders before assuming responsibility when they cross them. The theatre for our actions is increasingly in the country of origin.

The UNHCR is the main aid coordinator in the former Yugoslavia. How would you sum up the situation ?

The major challenge in the former Yugoslavia is gaining access to the afflicted populations. This also

applies to other countries such as Somalia or Sudan. Personally, I feel that access to the victims is the best form of humanitarian assistance and it can only be obtained through negotiation. I believe that our staff is highly competent in negotiating with all parties to the conflict. As a humanitarian organization, we do not take sides. We have to make sure that we are on the side of all the victims.

The European Union is one of the major contributors to the UNHCR and has also signed a framework partnership contract with it. How do you see this collaboration ?

I am very pleased about the European Union being a solid partner for the UNHCR. Even more so as a donor, the European Union is becoming increasingly operational which helps to meet our needs. We are therefore hoping to be able to set up an effective partnership, based on complementarity and the pooling of our respective strengths. Of course, this partnership is still in its infancy, given that the EU has only quite recently become operational. But the Union has the advantage of being a large funder. And I hope that its funds will be made available to those who have most experience on the ground. As it becomes an operational partner, the European Union will have a quite complicated dual role to play on the international humanitarian scene.

Interviewed by Antonio DE MENEZES  
for the European Union Monthly in Japanese.

## ECHO AND SPANISH NGOs : a presentation in Madrid



King Juan Carlos  
and Queen Sofia of Spain  
with Manuel Marín,  
Vice-President  
of the Commission.

In the context of presenting European Community humanitarian aid in the various Member States and in close coordination with the Commission's Representation Office in Madrid, ECHO organized an exhibition and a public event during which Vice-President Marín took the floor.

The Presidents or Directors of the Cruz Roja Espanola, Caritas Espana, Médicos Sin Fronteras, Movimiento por la Paz, el Desarme y la Libertad and Intermón also spoke during this action.

Also in the context of this initiative, Vice-President Marín was received by

King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain who were extremely interested in the European Union's activities in the humanitarian field and in the actions carried out by ECHO and the Spanish NGOs.

This presentation in Spain is in line with the Commission's wish to present its humanitarian policy in the various capitals of the Member States. The main objective is to raise public awareness about the work done by the European Union in the humanitarian field whether in conflict situations or natural disasters.