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Photo: Anastasia vrachina

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East Timor: a humanitarian obligation

As we go to press, Australian-led United Nations troops are staging a bid to stop the violence of militias in East Timor. About 40,000 people who fled the capital, Dili, are thought to be living rough in mountain camps, and nearly a quarter of a million are displaced in West Timor and surrounding islands. The security situation for getting aid to them all is still very precarious.

As the new European Commissioner for humanitarian aid, my reaction to the terrible scenes we are witnessing is that ECHO must get involved in this crisis as soon as possible. We must get involved via those who are able to do something meaningful that actually works on the spot. That means ECHO should be open and willing to find and to use partners able to implement viable projects for as long as need be. We must live up to our humanitarian obligation.

Poul Nielson

•ECHO has approved a second package of €3 million (€2 million was already approved in July) for the crisis in East Timor and is monitoring the situation closely to identify partners able to deliver aid as the security situation improves.



IFRC/Mikkel Oestergaard



UNHCR/A. Hellmann



UNHCR/R. Chalaisani

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Turkey devastated by earthquakes

In the aftermath of the 45-second tremor on 17 August, rescue workers, medical teams and volunteers discovered more than 15,000 dead, buried under tonnes of twisted steel and crumbled concrete. Ayse, an ambulance doctor whose team was among the first reach Golcuk, sends a first-hand account from the field. Four weeks later, a strong tremor rocked the same area, killing at least seven people and injuring more than 200..

Older people - a burden or resource?

At a conference in Helsinki, Finland, the spotlight was on the needs of the elderly and their right to live with dignity and self respect. Their special needs are often ignored, particularly during humanitarian crises, as is their grass-roots level role in peacebuilding and rebuilding broken communities. More than 100 participants heard first-hand accounts of experiences from around the world.

The rebuilding of Kosovo

More than 750,000 people have returned home, only to find a wasteland of looting and mass destruction. Many are homeless. ECHO is participating in a large-scale international effort to ensure they have adequate shelter and supplies to face a long, bitter winter. Refugees in neighbouring republics need assistance and Serbia, already accommodating half a million refugees, is coping with thousands of Serbs who have fled Kosovo.



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INTERVIEW

ECHO's 'can-do' commissioner



POUL NIELSON
The new Commissioner for development and humanitarian aid is a former Danish minister

and scandal that brought down the team Jacques Santer led. 'I hope everyone on the staff will see this as an opportunity for a fresh start,' he added.

As commissioner for both humanitarian aid and development, Nielson intends to make the most of a new opportunity to ensure there is a smooth transition between emergency relief activities and sustainable development. 'There's a big discussion on about the transition gap – there is a real grey area there that is very difficult to define. The value of having one commissioner for both is that we should be able to demonstrate to other players how this interface can be managed better.' In the previous Commission, Emma Bonino looked after humanitarian aid, while João de Deus Pineiro was responsible for most development activities.

If the rules don't work, change the rules. That is Poul Nielson's can-do message as he prepares to take charge of the humanitarian aid and development portfolios in the new European Commission.

Both ECHO and its partners have voiced concern in the past about the red tape that makes it difficult for them to react promptly when they need to do so. For ECHO, there are constraints in freeing up money at short notice, and it is not always able to recruit well-qualified specialist staff to meet its needs when necessary. Meanwhile, NGOs need prompt responses to their project proposals, and sometimes feel that ECHO imposes too much paperwork on them. Delays in payments are another cause for concern.

'If NGOs feel that ECHO is too bureaucratic, if the procedures make it difficult for ECHO to get things done in terms of staffing or anything else, the reaction should be not to for-

'We do not have a maverick licence as far as rules go'

get the rules, but to change the rules,' Nielson told EchoNews in an interview.

He paid tribute to the motivation and enthusiasm of ECHO staff, and promised that one of his top priorities would be to ensure that rules are practical and flexible. 'We need to preserve the valuable spirit of an action oriented organisation – which does not mean we have a maverick licence as far as administrative rules and procedures are concerned,' he added, referring to some of the rule-bending activities that came under the spotlight as ECHO was investigated by UCLAF, the Commission fraud squad, in 1998.

He said he hoped that the new Commission led by Romano Prodi would usher in a new culture free of the taint of fraud

'The transition gap – a real grey area that is difficult to define'

Better coordination with Member States and with the organisations that ECHO funds is another of Nielson's priorities. 'My starting point is that it's most important to improve co-ordination and to have a smoother interface between ECHO and the implementing side – the experience this year on financing activities in the Kosovo crisis showed very clearly that the way in which ECHO related to UNHCR and other organisations needed to be improved.'

Finally, Nielson said he would be looking at how best to communicate ECHO's role as a funder. He acknowledged the need to get public acknowledgement for those who pay, but was concerned that this should be done in a sensitive way.

For example, he was struck recently by the fact that ECHO's logo was the only one on display in a refugee camp he visited in Eastern Nepal. All other donors had agreed not to put up their logos, so as not to remind camp dwellers of their dependence on outsiders. 'Labelling has been a little too aggressive sometimes in practice. The dignity of the people and the whole psychological mood of the camp reflected the self-organised reality they had created.' He would be looking for a better balance in future: 'I think that traditionally, there has been too much emphasis on visibility and too little on usability.'

Poul Nielson was talking to Eva Kaluzynska of ECHO Information

Turkey struggle

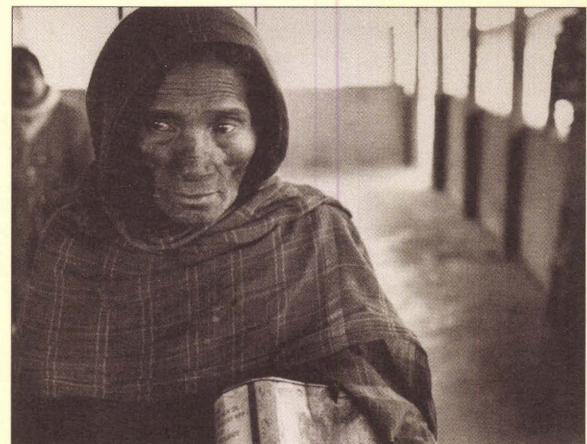
Ayse is an ambulance doctor whose team was among the first to reach Golcuk, the area worst hit by Turkey's earthquake. Here is what she wrote in an e-mail to a colleague in Germany after four days on duty

Dear Sabine,

Thank you for your message. Me and my family are OK, but unhappy. I was in Golcuk (the most affected area) from Tuesday to Friday. It was the first time I had worked in an earthquake. We left Izmir to go to Izmit (earthquake epicenter) at 7 am (four hours after the earthquake).

Though it usually takes six hours to get to Golcuk, it took us 10 hours. There was a terrible traffic jam in a very densely-populated area. After waiting for hours politely and begging motorists to let us pass, we forced them to move. We were really anxious about being too late to provide help.

We went there with sleeping bags, water and food, but we gave everything to victims we met, except for the water. We were the first health team to reach Golcuk (district of Izmit, population 75 000). A team of 20 people from Ukraine had arrived just two hours after the earthquake. I don't understand how they got there, but I think it's time to start believing in God. I was supposed to be triage officer, but none of our plans worked. About 80 percent of the buildings had col-



This refugee from Myanmar (Burma) is collecting food supplies for the family in a camp in Bangladesh

es with quake aftermath



Izmit, 18 August 1999

IFRC/ Mikkel Oestergaard

sed and people stopped us, asking for help to res-
relatives. It was impossible to say no. None of the
ir team slept for the first 48 hours, although
and 50 ambulance teams got there within six hours

ou feel like you are watching a ampire movie full of screams'

our arrival. Only the next day were we able to get
anised. I still hear the screaming of people under
ruins. They are not normal screams. You feel like
are watching a vampire movie full of screams
ing from underground. Now I hate construction
ineers. They were the ones that killed thousands of
ple, not the earthquake. I hope some of them are
begging for help under the ruins.

Even though I worked really hard, I don't feel
d. I want to go again but I know that I am trauma-
d. All of my Golcuk friends and I are hyperactive,
n manic now. We make crazy jokes and laugh
out the situation. For example, one of us was dig-

ging for the body of a woman when he was called to
rescue someone who was still alive. He got badly
beaten up by the dead woman's husband. We thought
this was very funny.

Tomorrow I have to organize new teams. Since
Thursday, there have been many donations of goods,
not all of them useful. I even saw perfume. And maybe
you will criticize me, but our teams are collecting sur-
plus medical supplies from the earthquake region so
that we have good stocks for the next disaster. I think
that's better than paying tomorrow for devices that I
saw lying on the street yesterday. Give my best regards
to everybody.

Ayse

ECHO has provided €4 million for victims of the
earthquake to date. The funding covers supply of
relief items such as tents, blankets, medical sup-
plies, mobile clinics and kitchens, as well as water
purification and sanitation items.

he elderly – burden or resource?

people are living longer. This ageing of populations is
changing the shape of families, neighbourhoods and
ons, giving rise to new needs for the elderly – including
se involved in humanitarian crises. Their special needs
often disregarded, as is their grass-roots role in peace-
ding and rebuilding communities.

As an awareness-raising event during the International
r of Older Persons, ECHO, in partnership with the
nish Red Cross, UNHCR and HelpAge International,
d a conference in Helsinki, Finland, 16 September. The
light was on the needs of the elderly and their right to
with dignity and self-respect, as well as their critical
e in post-conflict societies.

Participants heard first-hand accounts of experiences
m around the world, including Mozambique and The

Philippines, where different traditions, climates and con-
straints pose different challenges. These factors influence
the position of older people in those particular societies and
define their specific vulnerabilities, as well as their poten-
tial for contributing to renewal.

An ECHO video on older people caught in the Kosovo
crisis showed the situation through a different prism – it not
only highlighted their vulnerability, but recognised their
unique capacities and contributions.

“The stereotype of older people being a drain on socie-
ties is no longer appropriate,” said ECHO's Counsellor for
Information Giorgio Guarneri in his opening remarks. “We
know from experience that they are valuable resources in
terms of continuity in societies. They are, after all, our
guardians of tradition and history.”

ECHO's Global Reach

Middle East: aid for Palestinian refugees and host countries. €11m to support projects in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria as well as Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The priorities are healthcare, assistance for the disabled, water and sanitation; and the drought affecting the Bedouins in the Palestinian territories.

Romania: aid for institutions for the disabled. €1.75m to assist patients in 55 institutions for disabled children and adults. The aid will cover food, hygiene and other essentials. ECHO's partners are Solidarité (France) and Caritas (Austria).

Ethiopia/Eritrea: aid for people fleeing border conflict. €600,000 to enable Save the Children (UK) to provide food aid for 250,000 people caught in the conflict and who are either internally displaced or refugees from Ethiopia in NW Eritrea.

Nicaragua: assistance for evacuees around active volcanoes. €500,000 for evacuations in the wake of the eruption last August of Cerro Negro, the country's most active volcano. The authorities are also evacuating those near Momotombo, another volcano. ECHO's partners are the Red Cross (Spain) and Movimondo (Italy).

Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia: aid for refugees and displaced people. €4m will assist refugees who fled to neighbouring Guinea and Liberia and those displaced within Sierra Leone.

Ukraine and Belarus: social safety net for poorest victims of Russia's devastating financial crisis. €700,000 to assist the elderly, disabled, large families and single mothers. Caritas is organising home care, social centres, food parcels and hot meals.

Southwest Kenya: combating malaria. €530,000 to help Merlin (UK) combat a severe outbreak where two out of five in a population of 1m are infected and children under age five are most vulnerable.

Upcoming events

• **18 October** (Berlin) European Conference on Use of Children as Soldiers: organisers ECHO, German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNICEF, Terre des Hommes-Germany, Save the Children Fund-Sweden, World Vision International.

• **10 December** (Brussels) ECHO Framework Partnership Agreement: ECHO and partners meet to evaluate implementation of new FPA.

ECHO is supporting an effort to ensure every family has one heated, winter-proof room



June 1999: Roma on the move in search of safety

Returnees braced for harsh winter in Kosovo

About 750,000 people returned home to Kosovo in the late summer of 1999, only to find a wasteland of looting and mass destruction. ECHO is supporting an intensive international effort to make sure they have adequate shelter before winter sets in. It is also making sure that refugees and displaced people in neighbouring republics have access to continued assistance.

When the war ended, ECHO, in coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), implemented a return plan in which "return packages" were distributed to 20,000 families. These included material for urgent repairs to their homes (wood, plastic sheeting and tools), beds, mattresses, blankets and other relief items. The goal is to give each family at least one heated, winter-proof room per house until reconstruction can begin next spring.

Ongoing assistance

ECHO will ensure that ongoing assistance programmes to displaced persons and refugees in neighbouring republics are maintained as long as necessary. The crisis provoked by the mass movement of refugees did not evaporate once refugees left. Support to host families and vulnerable groups among the local popu-

lation is still needed, for the time being.

As well as the €182m of Community budget funding allocated last spring, ECHO stepped up its assistance in July with a further €196m to continue humanitarian aid until reconstruction is underway and local struc-

'The refugee crisis did not disappear with the refugees. Support to host families and vulnerable groups in the local population continues'

tures are in place. Funding for international organisations is allocated in a way which allows ECHO's partners to be flexible in a volatile situation where assistance needs have to be adjusted to constantly changing circumstances.

The funds will allow ECHO to provide aid through UN agencies, the Red Cross and non-governmental organisations. The total of €196 million is split as follows: €146 million is available for humanitarian actions immediately, while the balance of €50 million will be kept in a contingency reserve.

ECHO is assisting the World Food Programme with its caseload of about 900,000 beneficiaries in the province, as well as funding complementary feeding programmes in co-ordination with other donors. ECHO is also

supporting distribution of seeds and fertiliser for the winter planting season, and has funded a food security survey.

Before the crisis, ECHO supported both the official and "parallel" health care system set up by Kosovar Albanians. Now it plans to go on with its support of projects to supply medicines, while aiming to build up local drug management capacity.

ECHO is also supporting the rapid resumption of education in Kosovo, through the supply of school furniture, equipment and exercise books (via UNICEF) and the emergency rehabilitation of 70 schools across the province.

Special attention

ECHO recognises the situation in Serbia deserves special attention. The exodus of the Serb population from Kosovo has increased the burden in Serbia proper, which is already home to more than half a million refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina who are still unable to return home. They are facing a particularly harsh winter in the aftermath of the war.

As well as supporting humanitarian aid, the Commission has set up a special Task Force in Pristina to implement the first tranche of EC reconstruction financing in Kosovo (about €150 million). The European Union plans to set up a European Reconstruction Agency, which will take charge of EC reconstruction assistance to the region.



<http://europa.eu.int/comm/echo/en/index.html>

New on our website: ECHO has funding available for training and for information, communication and awareness-raising projects in the field of humanitarian aid. For full details of the types of activities eligible and how to apply, visit http://europa.eu.int/comm/echo/fr/finances/finan_fr.html. (Scroll to the bottom of the page.) Please note that the scheme is only open to humanitarian organisations. Individuals may not apply, and we do not award grants to students.