

## **OCHA ROLE AND SERVICES IN NATURAL DISASTER RESPONSE**

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This presentation provides a brief overview of OCHA's role and services in relation to natural disaster response

OCHA's mission is "to mobilize and coordinate the collective efforts of the international community, in particular those of the UN system, to meet in a coherent and timely manner the needs of those exposed to human suffering and material destruction in disasters and emergencies. This involves reducing vulnerability, promoting solutions to root causes, and facilitating the smooth transition from relief to rehabilitation and development."

OCHA's main role in disaster response is the coordination and mobilization of resources from the international community in order to ensure an appropriate, timely, and effective international response. OCHA is part of the United Nations Secretariat and reports through ECOSOC to the UN General Assembly. It coordinates the operational UN agencies and programmes such as UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO and FAO. The United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, as head of OCHA, provides leadership to the UN system efforts and seeks to coordinate the response activities of the wider international community; this includes non-governmental organizations, inter-governmental organization, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement and bilateral assistance

In natural disasters, OCHA facilitates the mobilization and coordination of international assistance in support of the Government of an affected country, if the country requests or welcomes international assistance. We seek to provide support in this regard at the country level and at the level of the disaster site. At the country level, OCHA is represented by the United Nations Resident coordinator who leads the UN system effort under the authority of the ERC. At the international level coordination efforts are carried out from Geneva, where many humanitarian agencies are based and from New York where the ERC has direct access to the UN Secretary General.

At the country and on-site level, OCHA provides support to the UN Resident Coordinator the United Nations Disaster Management Team and national and local authorities. Frequently, OCHA dispatches United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) Teams to facilitate rapid on-site assessment of the situation as well as coordination; for example by establishing an on-site Operations Coordination Centre. The UNDAC team consists of experienced disaster managers drawn from among United Nations and national experts. Currently, 29 countries participate in the UNDAC system by making available national disaster management experts on a stand-by basis, who can be deployed within a few hours notice to a disaster. Since 1993, over 50 UNDAC teams have been deployed. A number of countries represented such as China, Bangladesh and Nicaragua have benefited from the assistance of UNDAC teams.

OCHA supports national authorities and the UN system in the preparation of appeals to the international community for immediate relief and initial recovery assistance. Last year's appeals included China, Bangladesh and an appeal for assistance during the transitional period from relief to recovery in support of the countries affected by Hurricane Mitch.

OCHA can provide a maximum amount of US\$ 50,000 as an emergency cash grant. In addition, we have

rapid access to cash resources from donors providing supplementary emergency grants. Many donors channel cash contributions through OCHA for the implementation of concerted relief programmes. OCHA then channels these funds further through the UN Resident Coordinator's Office and through suitable implementing partners who cooperate in coordinated relief activities.

OCHA can also support in-country efforts by mobilizing specific assets, such as logistics, communications and transport capacities, and special expertise that may be required in response to identified needs

In Geneva, OCHA has a 24-hour monitoring system, which allows us to initiate OCHA disaster response coordination services at any moment required. From Geneva, we disseminate situation reports to alert and inform the international community on the occurrence of a disaster, the national capacity to respond, and any resulting needs for international assistance. Situation reports are sent by e-mail and facsimile to over 700 addresses and posted on the OCHA Internet-Site, *ReliefWeb*.

Coordination and information meetings are organized in Geneva and in New York to ensure the coordination of activities among the relevant UN system agencies and with partners involved in the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. Information meetings are organized with the donor community and other interested countries to mobilize resources and to share information.

If an international appeal is issued at the country level, it is often launched at the same time in Geneva and in New York in order to ensure maximum publicity and resource mobilization.

OCHA tries to maintain an overview of contributions provided by the international Community in response to disaster situations. This includes contributions from all sources, and through different channels, including bilateral donors, the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent System, inter-governmental organizations, and the private sector.

OCHA carries out programme monitoring and reporting activities regarding funds channeled through OCHA in the interest of maximum effectiveness and accountability. We conduct evaluations and lessons learnt studies for improving the coordination of relief and the impact of international response activities in general.

OCHA implements its responsibility for the coordination of relief activities following natural disasters through the Disaster Response Branch (DRB), which is part of the OCHA Geneva Office. DRB consists of regional desks and functional units. The regional desks are the focal point of contact with disaster-affected countries and lead the provision of OCHA's coordination and support services.

The Field Coordination Support Unit (FCSU) is a functional unit responsible for the management of the UNDAC system and the development of methodology for assessment as well as programme and operational coordination. The Unit also develops stand-by arrangements with donors for the mobilization of specific assets in the form of technical and logistic resources.

The Military and Civil Defense Unit (MCDU) is the focal point within the UN system for mobilizing military and civil defense assets to be used by different UN humanitarian agencies for the provision of life-saving and life-sustaining support. These assets are often used in the context of complex emergencies; but have in the past, also been mobilized for natural disasters, following, for example, the devastating earthquakes which hit Afghanistan last year. MCDU mobilized transport capacity, air control and communications support teams to deliver urgently needed relief supplies to the remote, inaccessible disaster affected areas

Under a cooperative arrangement with UNEP, OCHA has established a joint OCHA/UNEP Environment Unit within OCHA's Disaster Response Branch. In view of the increasing environmental damage and pollution following natural disasters, the requests for the unit's services have been on the rise. Through this collaborative effort, OCHA can provide specialized technical assistance to deal with environmental aspects of emergencies and respond to industrial and technological accidents.

OCHA manages a stockpile of emergency relief supplies located in Pisa, Italy. The warehouse is managed in

close cooperation with WFP and WHO. It maintains a stock of basic relief supplies, such as blankets and tents, as well as food and medical supplies, which can be rapidly dispatched to a disaster.

OCHA's project for the use of emergency telecommunications with and in the field provides support services to humanitarian agencies and affected countries. The use of telecommunications in disaster mitigation and relief is promoted through an International Convention.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a significant increase in the suffering, devastation, economic loss, and social disruption caused by natural disasters during recent years, culminating in 1998 when disasters had a particularly devastating impact. There was also a significant increase in contributions provided by the international community in response to these disasters. In 1998, contributions reported to OCHA reached over US\$ 1 billion. This is a more than 200 per cent increase, as compared to the international assistance provided in the previous year. This figure does not include uncosted in-kind contributions. It corresponds roughly to the amount recorded in 1998 in response to complex emergencies.

Only a small portion of the funds provided by the international community is channeled through OCHA. However, the amount channeled through OCHA has been steadily increasing in recent years, reaching US\$ 11 million in 1998. This reflects the growing confidence on the part of the donor community in the capacity of OCHA to guide the implementation of well-coordinated relief programmes.

Further information on OCHA's role and services is available on the OCHA Internet Website *ReliefWeb* at the following address: <http://www.reliefweb.int>. and in the documentation made available to the workshop participants.

