Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
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Resolution 1586 (2007)[1]

Europe's response to humanitarian disasters

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The growing number of humanitarian disasters following natural catastrophes of increasing scale and intensity, and the fact that the former mainly hit areas of the world that are least able to cope with them – tsunamis in South-East Asia, earthquakes in northern Pakistan, Indonesia and Peru, floods in North Korea, China, Africa and India, forest fires in the Mediterranean region, drought in Somalia and hurricanes in the Caribbean and the Indian ocean – raise questions about the adequacy of international aid structures to respond swiftly and effectively in disaster-stricken areas.

2. In addition, the humanitarian situation of people affected by armed conflict is deteriorating significantly, as conflicts continue to rage in many countries, imposing immense suffering on the children, women and men caught up in them. The growing number of complex emergencies such as those in Darfur, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories raises further questions about restricted humanitarian access to the most vulnerable areas; the frequent violation of humanitarian space; the difficulties in safeguarding principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality for the safety of the civil population and humanitarian aid workers; civil and military co-operation in the delivery of humanitarian aid relief; and about the important role of the media.

3. The European region alone provides more than 60% of both material and financial international humanitarian aid. The scale of the disasters and experience in dealing with them have highlighted the need for a wider analysis of Europe's response and responsibility towards humanitarian disasters both in Europe and elsewhere.

4. In Resolution 1422 (2005) on Europe and the tsunami disaster, the Parliamentary Assembly made an initial assessment of where Europe's responsibility lies in humanitarian disasters, calling on member states of the Council of Europe to honour the funds pledged and to give unequivocal support to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in its central role at the heart of relief operations. Governments, international organisations and civil society were also called upon to ensure transparency and accountability in their humanitarian aid programmes.

5. It is widely felt today that the humanitarian aid community must strengthen core technical and logistical capacity, broaden its capacity base and improve international co-ordination and performance. Leadership must be strengthened at field level by providing greater support to relevant authorities and civil-society actors in disaster-prone countries.

6. The United Nations Humanitarian Reform Agenda therefore aims to dramatically enhance the humanitarian response capacity, the predictability of operations, accountability and partnership. It is an ambitious effort by the international humanitarian community to reach more beneficiaries, with more comprehensive needs-based relief and protection, in a more effective and timely manner. As a result of the reform agenda, a new system of clusters was introduced to fill in gaps and avoid overlapping between humanitarian actors, humanitarian co-ordinators were established to strengthen leadership at field level, and the Central Emergency Response Fund was upgraded to jump-start lifesaving relief operations within the first 72 hours of a disaster.

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 23 November 2007 (see Doc. 11429, report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, rapporteur: Mr Mooney).

7. European states currently participate in international responses to humanitarian disasters through a number of mechanisms: by taking action directly and unilaterally through civil or military intervention subject to the authority of the recipient state; by channelling funds or aid donations through individual United Nations agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and/or NGOs, which may or may not be earmarked for specific countries or for thematic aid; or by supporting co-ordinated intervention which may be channelled through multilateral or interstate organisations (the United Nations and the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The various channels through which European states respond to humanitarian disasters therefore constitute a very complex environment.

8. The challenge of co-ordinating international and European humanitarian responses is undoubtedly a difficult task which requires a permanent knowledge base of available assets, competences, funding, tracking of donors and recipients, and ultimately evaluation of results.

9. The problem now facing Europe as regards its role in further improving the international co-ordination framework for humanitarian assistance is political. At present, there is no political agreement between the member states as to how humanitarian assistance and civil protection should be effectively organised.

10. If a united co-ordination platform is to be achieved, member states need to decide which of their ministries should play the central role in co-ordinating humanitarian aid within the various European and international humanitarian assistance and civil protection mechanisms. Another option would be to set up national bodies to ensure that competent and/or interested ministries play a complementary role in the provision of humanitarian aid without entering into competition with one another.

11. Steps to improve member states' capacity to respond to humanitarian disasters must go hand in hand with additional financial and environmental measures to reduce future risks. Developing countries are more seriously affected by natural disasters and the losses caused represent a much larger proportion of their gross domestic product (GDP). In the light of such inequalities, member states should endeavour to reach the target of 0.7% of their GDP for public overseas development assistance.

12. The Assembly consequently calls on the member states to:

12.1. designate a national focal point to co-ordinate national responses to international humanitarian crises and emergencies in order to avoid the proliferation of unco-ordinated mechanisms, the collision of mandates, competition for resources and overlapping of initiatives, all of which have a negative impact on the international system's capacity to deal quickly and effectively with emergencies at global level;

12.2. request the national focal point to regularly report to the ministry of foreign affairs and the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs;

12.3. entrust the national focal point and the ministry of foreign affairs with a single level of decision making in response to international flash appeals;

12.4. give unequivocal support to OCHA in its central role at the heart of relief operations;

12.5. create a permanent database of existing capacities and assets that could be deployed for international relief operations to be shared with OCHA through the UN Central Register of Relief Capabilities;

12.6. seek a European political agreement as to when the military can be deployed in humanitarian relief interventions, while respecting the co-ordination role of the United Nations and the principles set forth by the 1994 Oslo Guidelines and the 2003 Guidelines on the use of Military and Civil Defence Assets;

12.7. ensure transparency and accountability of humanitarian relief programmes;

12.8. ensure that funds made available for deployment of the civil protection mechanism outside Europe are without prejudice to the existing funding for humanitarian relief;

12.9. honour the funds pledged for humanitarian assistance;

12.10. consolidate the support to the International Committee of the Red Cross to enable it to continue its vital, neutral and independent humanitarian protection and assistance activities;

12.11. in terms of medium- and long-term efficiency of resources, also allocate humanitarian donor funding for prevention;

12.12. endeavour to reach the target of 0.7% GDP for public overseas development assistance.

13. The Assembly recommends that the OCHA hold, in co-operation with the Council of Europe and the European Union, annual meetings of European national focal points for humanitarian response in order to review progress made and address outstanding issues of humanitarian concern, with a view to recommending any action to be taken at national and European level to make international relief co-ordination more effective.