

Strengthening emergency response

Over the past 16 years, UNHCR has responded to 13 large-scale emergencies, in which more than 500,000 people were displaced and in need of assistance, in areas as diverse as the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia, West and Central Africa and South-East Asia. In statistical terms, every 16 months there has been a large-scale emergency, with a massive one, involving the displacement of more than 1.5 million people, every two years. The Office has also had to deal with an even larger number of smaller emergencies, which have not commanded the same international news media attention.

UNHCR, as a major player in the international emergency response system, has over the years strengthened its planning, human resources, supply stockpiles and early warning systems, to face the operational challenges of the numerous emergencies it has had to respond to. While much progress has been made, more needs to be done.

Thus, one of the principal commitments made by the High Commissioner upon taking office in 2005 was to ensure that UNHCR is better equipped to respond to emergencies in any part of the world. This commitment has been translated into one of the Office's Global Strategic Objectives for the period 2007-2009, which aims to strengthen the organization's emergency preparedness and response capacity to cater for the initial needs of up to 500,000 displaced people in humanitarian emergencies.

Responding to emergencies demands significant operational engagement, readily available staff and resources, and an effective, coordinated humanitarian response. In essence, it depends on how fast the right people and the necessary relief items can be mobilized to the areas where they are needed, together with operations support equipment and management and administration capacity with efficient emergency procedures. Early warning and situation-specific awareness linked to emergency procedures are also key components of emergency preparedness, and need to be constantly updated.

The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and the South Asia earthquake of 2005 were stark examples of the destructive power of nature, taking the lives of more than 270,000 people in countries as far apart as Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Pakistan and India. The response to these events, together with operational

responses to conflict-generated humanitarian emergencies in places such as Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Timor-Leste, Lebanon and elsewhere, have severely tested the capacity of UNHCR and the humanitarian system as a whole. They have also confirmed the imperative for a strengthened emergency response capacity within the Organization, and underscored the need for more effective coordination and interaction between humanitarian organizations and political, military and financial actors (both donors and the private sector).

The UN humanitarian reform initiative has resulted in a number of important changes in the way that humanitarian agencies and organizations go about their work. Principal among them is the development of the "cluster leadership approach" by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) with regard to responding to the humanitarian needs of internally displaced people. UNHCR was delegated global leadership of the following three clusters: protection, camp coordination and management, and emergency shelter, for conflict-generated emergencies. The "cluster leadership approach" was applied in six countries in 2006. While the reform process has objectively sought to strengthen the system-wide emergency response capacity, build collaborative partnerships, improve humanitarian leadership and coordination, and ensure more predictable funding, for UNHCR it has entailed a major engagement in the process by chairing the three clusters at the global level as well as in the Field.

In line with the High Commissioner's commitment, in late 2005 UNHCR developed a plan of action to strengthen its capacity to respond to emergencies involving up to 500,000 people. The plan, which reflects the new inter-agency commitments and working methods outlined in the humanitarian reform initiative, incorporates elements such as an increase in the number of emergency preparedness and response, information technology, telecommunications and logistics staff; cost analyses for the provision of relief items; changes in internal rules to make emergency response more flexible; the immediate availability of information technology and telecoms equipment; and the reinforcement of standby agreements with other organizations to deploy technical emergency staff when needed. UNHCR has systematically worked through its plan of action in order to ensure that the necessary emergency response capacity is put in place. Drawing from recent experiences and applying lessons learned, the Office will continue to review its



Between mid-July and mid-August, UNHCR moved nearly 15,000 tents, 154,500 blankets, 53,600 mattresses and 13,500 kitchen sets into Lebanon and Syria. *UNHCR / A.Branthwaite*

capacity, competencies and approaches to emergency preparedness, response and operational management.

Between January and September 2006, UNHCR deployed 200 staff to 27 countries which were affected by emergencies. The largest deployments of emergency staff were to respond to the crisis in Lebanon; the Pakistan earthquake; renewed internal displacement in Timor-Leste; the protection needs in Sudan and, most recently, to address the influx of Somalis in Kenya. Emergency Response Team members (see box) were deployed for an average of 90 days, making a total of 17,918 person days.

By September 2006, UNHCR was in a position to respond within 72 hours to the immediate needs of 400,000 people in a humanitarian emergency, and will build up to the target of 500,000 by the end of 2007. In terms of personnel, in 2006 UNHCR had an average standby capacity of some 250 internal and external staff. Stocks of key emergency relief items, such as blankets, plastic sheeting, jerry cans and kitchen sets, were in place at the time of writing to cover the needs of some 400,000 people. In addition to providing plastic sheeting for emergency shelter, the special shelter needs of 100,000 vulnerable people can be covered with the newly introduced lightweight emergency tents.

In order to bring UNHCR's standby response capacity up to the agreed 500,000 people the following will be required:

- **Staffing:** The number of standby staff will be increased to 300 by including former Emergency Response Team members on a two-year roster for exceptional large-scale emergencies. In 2007 UNHCR will conduct three Workshops on Emergency Management and maintain the Emergency Response Team roster, which will consist of 90 UNHCR staff and another 30 staff of partners and other United Nations agencies. Combined with senior staff deployments from the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section, this will constitute the primary emergency response mechanism during the initial phase of any new response to an emergency. In addition, UNHCR will run two courses in 2007 in the new inter-agency Emergency Team Leadership Training Programme, to strengthen the quality of leadership in humanitarian emergency operations, help support improved coordination between all actors, and foster the ongoing development of best practices in emergency leadership and management.

Furthermore, UNHCR will review and strengthen the internal capacity of technical experts; reinforce existing partnerships and seek new ones; and review internal posting systems to increase the efficiency of deployment of regular staff.

Close collaboration between Headquarters and UNHCR's eCentre in Japan will remain a core objective within the overall emergency training strategy in 2007. The main goal of the eCentre is to improve

emergency preparedness and response, as well as the management of staff safety by strengthening the operational capacity of relevant government departments, NGOs and United Nations agencies in the Asia-Pacific region. The eCentre's activities will include training on participatory assessment and will pay special attention in encouraging female participants and organizations carrying out activities focused on the special needs of women and children.

- **Non-food items and logistics:** UNHCR's central emergency stockpiles in Copenhagen and Dubai will be increased to cover the basic emergency needs for key shelter and domestic items of 500,000 people. This will require a considerable investment in the new lightweight emergency tent. Improved management mechanisms will be in place for all of UNHCR stockpiles to ensure effective use and rapid deployments. In addition, UNHCR will seek additional external standby capacity and coordination for supplies and logistics, including regional and national capacity in standby agreements, NGO capacities, and agreements with civil defence departments within governments to complement existing ones with the Russian Federation, Sweden and Norway.
- **Operational support:** The Office will improve support modules for office and accommodation to meet designated minimum standards; introduce readily-available information technology and communications packages for immediate deployment with Emergency Response Teams; and provide other support kits as needed.
- **Management and emergency procedures:** UNHCR will reinforce effective emergency procedures to apply to overall internal emergency management; collate all emergency operations and management procedures into a single document; and update the *Emergency Handbook*.
- **Contingency planning and early warning:** Emergency and security management and support will be improved through better contingency planning at the global, regional and country levels, linked to better early warning analysis. The *Action Alert* early warning system, established in 2005, is due for revision in late 2006 and will be further developed in 2007.

- **Financial and implementation procedures:** UNHCR will maintain a financial allocation in the Operational Reserve for emergency activities. Resource allocation procedures for emergencies will be simplified.
- **Security of beneficiaries:** In humanitarian emergencies, the issue of refugee, IDP, returnee and local community security and physical protection can be one of the most demanding, difficult and critical of humanitarian protection interventions. UNHCR must consider this factor and always be ready and able to interact with those who have primary responsibility and legal obligation to ensure the protection of civilians caught up in armed conflict. The importance of a comprehensive approach to improving refugee and IDP security has been recognized by the international community as a whole and, where necessary, UNHCR supports States in meeting their primary responsibilities. Efforts to strengthen national capacity to manage refugee and returnee related security issues – as presented in the *Agenda for Protection* (Goals 3 and 4) – will also include advocacy and specific programme activities in the areas of mine action, small arms and light weapons, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and interaction with national and international military forces. In 2007 UNHCR will further explore its strategic and operational cooperation with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) on these issues and will pay special attention to planning of and participation within UN integrated missions.

UNHCR's strengthened emergency response capacity will ensure a predictable and professional emergency response to refugee and IDP situations. It will also enable the Office to address the needs of the Emergency Shelter Cluster and integrate UNHCR's role in the Camp Coordination and Management as well as the protection Clusters. The stronger focus on partnerships and inter-agency collaboration, as well as the establishment of sufficient capacity in the three UNHCR-led clusters, will significantly contribute to the humanitarian reform process.



UNHCR's Emergency Response Teams

UNHCR's Emergency Roster continues to be the primary resource for emergency response personnel.

Emergency Response Team (ERTeam) members have to be fully operational from the moment they arrive in an operation, often in extremely stressful and chaotic situations. That is why, when they volunteer to be on standby for the ERTeam, even though they may be already experienced staff, they still have to go on a Workshop on Emergency Management - nine days of intensive training in practical skills such as camp design and management, telecommunications, off-road driving and first aid. They are also trained on how to handle a wide range of security issues, including dealing with armed militias, and how to react if held up at gunpoint, kidnapped or taken hostage.

The course, which takes around 40 participants from UNHCR and other organizations from across the world, is held three times a year. By the time they have completed it participants are physically and mentally prepared to face some of the toughest and most challenging situations in the world.

Over the past two years alone, ERTeams have been deployed in more than 20 situations, including in Sudan, Chad, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Indonesia's Aceh province after it had been devastated by the tsunami. Most recently, UNHCR ERTeams have been deployed to help tens of thousands of newly internally displaced East Timorese and hundreds of thousands of displaced Lebanese, the latter both inside their home country and across the border in the Syrian Arab Republic.

A new monthly contributions programme to support the Emergency Response Team, aimed at individual contributors, was launched at the end of 2006 by UNHCR's Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie. See www.erteam.unhcr.org.



During the East Timor emergency, UNHCR provided shelter for the displaced, using newly developed lightweight tents. *UNHCR / N. Ng*