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STATEMENT

Information Saves Lives During Humanitarian Crises

Humanitarian disasters such as the earthquake, subsequent tsunami and the failure of nuclear power plants in Japan can cause information crises. ARTICLE 19 urges all states to respect their international obligations to provide access to timely and accurate information.

The situation in Japan and the region demonstrates the crucial need to respect, protect and fulfil the right to information during national and international responses to disasters. A lack of accurate information can lead to further tragic consequences for populations and it is therefore essential that states implement their international obligations on the right to information following humanitarian disasters.

ARTICLE 19's publication *Humanitarian Disasters And Information Rights* explains that access to information is of particular importance in the aftermath of a disaster to:

- Mitigate the loss of life
- Reduce panic
- Direct people on how and where to get essential services
- Facilitate contact with relatives and friends
- Assist in the discovery of the missing and in burying the dead appropriately
- Provide an outlet for grief and counselling
- Provide watchdog oversight over assistance activities and help guard against corruption
- Ensure two-way communication between assistance providers and the affected communities.

Humanitarian disasters can create information crises, which should be dealt with in compliance with international access to information standards and in this case, the standards on access to environmental information. These standards are set out in Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. By adopting the Rio Declaration, Japan and all other UN Member States have made commitments to ensure public access to environmental information, particularly in times of crisis. The *Guidelines for the Development of National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters* released by the UN Environmental Programme in 2010 elaborate how states should implement Principle 10 into national law, including in cases of threats to human health and the environment.

In the event of any imminent threat to human health or the environment, states should disseminate immediately and without delay to all members of the public who may be affected – both internally and abroad – all information which could enable the public to take steps to prevent or mitigate harm arising from the threat. Furthermore, states are under a general obligation to provide appropriate warning systems, taking into account the level of risk facing their citizens.

To ensure effective responses to recent humanitarian disasters, ARTICLE 19 makes the following recommendations:

States affected by humanitarian disasters should:

- Ensure that populations in high risk areas are informed about the preventive or mitigating measures that may be taken in case of an imminent disaster
- Make all possible efforts to ensure that any information they hold about immediate risks is communicated as quickly and as widely as possible to those likely to be affected
- Establish clear lines of communication with relief organisations, the media and affected populations to disseminate information
- Ensure that survivors have access to key information including on the provision of food, water, shelter, and medical and other services
- Ensure that the right of everyone to communicate messages about pending disasters should not be subject to limitations
- Take effective measures to trace those missing or dead, to identify the dead and to inform relatives.

In addition, the media should:

- Provide a channel for the dissemination of official information on humanitarian risks and responses
- Ensure that complex messages from state actors are translated into understandable forms for the public
- Play a key role in raising awareness and facilitating discussions on disasters and other risks, with a view to educating people on preventive and survival actions.

END NOTES:

- For more information, please contact: Boyko Boev, Senior Legal Officer at boyko@article19.org or +44 20 7324 2500.
- ARTICLE 19's policy document *Humanitarian Disasters and Information Rights* can be found at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/freedom-of-information-humanitarian-disasters.pdf>
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.