

OCHA AND THE UNITED NATIONS

FIGHTING CATASTROPHES ONE DAY AT A TIME

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by K. John Morrow Jr.



Members of the Jordanian battalion of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) carry children through flood waters after a rescue from an orphanage destroyed by Hurricane "Ike."

UN PHOTO/MARCO DORMINO

The United Nations is well known as a stage for international power struggles and as a constant source of opprobrium by right wing conservatives. It provides the backdrop for clashes that receive heavy coverage in the media. Virtually ignored by the press, however, are its myriad humanitarian and scientific agencies.

OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) is a small but critically important UN mission that, according to their website, seeks “to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.” Its current mandate charges it with the provision and management of aid in disasters and emergencies and the support of human rights, while promoting preparedness and facilitating sustainable solutions.

Headquartered in both New York, USA, and Geneva, Switzerland, the approximately 1,800 OCHA staff are sprinkled around the world in 30 regional and field offices. The UN contributes \$12M of its \$239M budget that is strongly supported by member states (scaled according to their financial situation).

This combined sum seems a miniscule figure (equivalent to approximately one day for the American Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan) when compared to the mind-boggling task of taking the world in for repairs. As Vladimir Sakharov, the Chief of the Emergency Preparedness Section in Geneva explains, “In New York, the UN confronts complex civil strife, but here in Switzerland OCHA must be able to respond to natural disasters. We do not duplicate the activities of WHO and UNICEF, rather we work as a coordinator of disaster response. But our ultimate goal is to prevent them from happening in the first place and mitigate their consequences through preparedness.”

Whereas some natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, can be predicted, the time to react is either short or non-existent. In many cases, however, adverse effects can be minimized through advance planning and coordinated action. “What might be a routine accident in one country may be a disaster in another,” Sakharov states.

OCHA’s coordinated efforts, funneled through the affected governments, run the gamut from distribution of food and material aid, protection of human rights, facilitating access to clean water, and medical care. These activities mobilize and prevent



PHOTO: CHRIS MACLEAN

duplication of effort from a variety of organizations, including UN agencies, non-governmental agencies and the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

A wide range of industrial and technological accidents are confronted by the agency – including chemical spills, forest fires and other conflagrations and combinations of natural and technological events such as earthquakes. “Natural and technological events” refers to the confrontation of phenomena such as earthquakes and floods with the quality of the infrastructure and the rapidity and effectiveness of governmental response. In fact, Sakharov asserts that there is no such thing as a “natural” disaster. “All of these events are an intersection of inadequate planning, such as faulty building construction, resulting in great loss of life during earthquakes,” he explains.

Since 1993, OCHA has carried out 183 missions around the world. In North America, the agency’s most memorable action was the provision of aid in the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina. On September 3, 2005, the United Nations mobilized three inter-agency teams to work on logistics and coordination in conjunction with US authorities, following acceptance of OCHA’s offer of assistance. This system was instrumental in reducing the risk of over-supply and provided implementation for tracking international donations to the distribution point.

Has OCHA improved the global response to disasters? A base of solid evidence points to the affirmative. For instance, in Southern Africa, improvements in contingency planning over the years have saved many from floods. “The situation in Mozambique remains critical (as of a 2008 report), as rains continue to fall, but whereas flooding in 2002 “killed hundreds, and in 2007 dozens, in 2008 only three people died.” The report goes on to explain that “contingency planning by nine countries in the region in 2007 meant they were much better prepared for the floods.” It should be noted that the first floods of 2009 boded ill for this year’s flood season.

OCHA’s records indicate that 2008 saw the Southern Africa region experience its third year in a row of flooding that displaced nearly 100,000 people. They coordinated relief efforts of numerous aid groups such as FAO, WFP and UNICEF.

Crop damage and property destruction has been widespread. Reduced fatality figures in Bangladesh, however, attest to the use of early warning systems for cyclones. A lessening of the flooding impact in Ethiopia has been attributed to contingency plans adopted following the 2007 floods.



UN PHOTO: RICK BAJORNAS

H1N1

OCHA's activities can go a long way to lessen suffering. But some natural disasters require tremendous long term commitment, much more than OCHA can provide. Earthquakes can be incredibly destructive, but in regions such as New Zealand, Japan and California, which have had effective building codes in place for years, the amount of death and property damage is a tiny fraction of what occurs in similar magnitude quakes in underdeveloped countries. So while OCHA can provide guidance, it cannot remake a social and political order. For this reason, it aims to strengthen its disaster response preparedness programs for the high risk, low capacity countries that will always be most severely affected by an earthquake or other similar catastrophe.

expertise, but the region touched by these disasters must supply the minimum resources. Yet today, in a period of economic downturn, it is difficult to convince Third World governments that they should commit resources to counter events that they pray may never happen.

Finally, perhaps the most cogent question is whether past history enables us to predict the future. This, of course, is the basis of any preventive program, but, with the certainty of climate change currently being experienced, the possibility of successful prediction is clouded. Already, massive changes in weather patterns are occurring through the world, and these events threaten to impinge on every type of natural disaster. Floods, fires, droughts and epidemics are all

One of the most critical functions of OCHA is the tracking of disease outbreaks; the most prominent in recent months has been **Influenza A(H1N1)** epidemic which originated in Mexico and now has spread worldwide. Currently, it is impossible to predict the development and spread of disease, so the role of OCHA has been to train personnel, distribute and reinforce antiviral stocks, and coordinate surveillance and response teams. The WHO reference laboratory at South Africa's National Institute for Communicable diseases is testing suspected cases in South Africa and for the continent as a whole, as required. So far, the emerging picture is that, outside of Mexico, the disease is comparatively mild. However, it is steadily progressing – WHO reports that worldwide cases reached 94,512 by the first week of July. By mid-July, the United States had attributed 263 deaths to Swine flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As of 15 July 2009, a total of 10,156 laboratory-confirmed cases of H1N1 flu virus had been reported to the Public Health Agency of Canada from all provinces and territories. Of these, 45 people had died.

While the future course of the possible pandemic is unknown at this time, the information being collected and its assembly and interpretation by OCHA and other international agencies is invaluable. The age distribution of cases is particularly striking; most cases have been observed in young adults, suggesting that the elderly population may carry some immunity due to previous exposures to similar viral strains. As a repository of data is accumulated, and as the tools for its interpretation become more refined, an understanding of the dynamics of the H1N1 epidemiology will become clearer.



UN PHOTO: EVAN SCHNEIDER

School building lies in ruins.

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In the final analysis, Sakharov asks, "Can we really be prepared?" The answer depends on a number of factors, both scientific and political. Different scenarios, earthquakes, floods and industrial failures all present a variety of disruptive challenges. But there is a common thread running through a successful response – there must be a strong level of political commitment, combined with a willingness to fund preparedness needs.

It is important to bear in mind that OCHA supplies scientific and managerial

exacerbated by climate change. According to Sakharov, 70% of disasters are now classified as "climate-related," up from 50% two decades ago. Equally worrisome is the fact that the cost of responding to disasters has risen 10-fold between 1993 and 2008.

Whatever the level of global climate change, it is clear that in the future OCHA's skills will be tested as never before. **S**

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