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ASSISTANCE IN CASES OF NATURAL DISASTER AND
OTHER DISASTER SITUATIONS

Activities of the Office of the United Nations Disaster
Relief Co-ordinator (UNDRO)

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted in accordance with paragraph 1 (j) of General Assembly resolution 2816 (XXVI) of 14 December 1971. Under that resolution the General Assembly established the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator and called upon the Co-ordinator inter alia "to prepare an annual report for the Secretary-General, to be submitted to the Economic and Social Council and to the General Assembly".

2. The Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (UNDRO) has been in existence for just over a year at the time of the preparation of this report. It began with a minimal staff and the Co-ordinator has had to aim at assuming only gradually the responsibilities assigned him by General Assembly resolutions 2816 (XXVI) and 2959 (XXVII). Apart from the Co-ordinator and the Director, the Office is now organized in two sections. The Planning and Preparedness Section concentrates for the moment on assisting disaster-prone countries to create or develop national machinery to prevent or mitigate the effects of disasters and to improve their pre-disaster contingency planning. Available staff resources have permitted only a preliminary approach to some of the tasks of this Section laid down in resolution 2816 (XXVI), such as the responsibility "to promote the study, prevention, control and prediction of natural disasters, including the collection and dissemination of information concerning technological developments". The Clearing-House Section maintains data on relief supplies and services available from donors (Governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations); receives and collates information from disaster-stricken areas; passes on information and requests for assistance to donors; co-ordinates the procurement and whenever possible attempts to secure the free transportation of relief supplies and services; arranges the utilization of grants for emergency assistance, currently in the form of withdrawals from the Working Capital Fund; and maintains detailed records of aid requirements and aid furnished in each disaster situation.

II. PRE-DISASTER PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

3. The General Assembly, in resolution 2959 (XXVII) of 12 December 1972, reaffirmed "the vital importance, in order to lessen the impact of disasters, of assistance to disaster-prone countries in preventive measures, disaster contingency planning and preparedness" and expressed the view that "the Disaster Relief Co-ordinator should continue to explore ways of strengthening and developing national contingency plans and machinery for disaster relief co-ordination at the national level...". As an interim measure the Secretary-General was authorized to draw on the Working Capital Fund in the amount of \$25,000 in 1973 for assistance to Governments, at their request, in the elaboration of national preparations to meet natural disasters. The Secretary-General was further called upon to explore various means, including support through the United Nations Development Programme, of making adequate provision subsequently for this purpose. This exploration is still under way.

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4. The Co-ordinator has received the first request for such assistance from a Government and other requests are anticipated. An analysis of previous major disasters has been prepared, in consultation with other organizations, in order to establish priorities. The assistance programme of the Office of the Co-ordinator will initially concentrate on a limited number of countries which are particularly disaster-prone and will cover disaster mitigation and prevention activities as well as disaster preparedness.

5. The Office has also established working relations and undertaken joint projects relating to disaster prevention and preparedness with a number of agencies. It participated in the last session of the Typhoon Committee, which is sponsored jointly by the World Meteorological Organization and the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. It will participate in the forthcoming session of the Committee on Tropical Cyclones in the South-West Indian Ocean and, in preparation for it, is contributing to a joint project on community preparedness in that area with the World Meteorological Organization and the League of Red Cross Societies. The Office may also participate in the first meeting of the Committee on Tropical Cyclones in the Bay of Bengal, to be held in the summer of 1973. It is also endeavouring to promote, in co-operation with the International Geographical Union, a programme for the publication of a series of studies on specific types of natural disasters, which would make available to all disaster-prone developing countries a succinct statement on the present state of knowledge both with respect to the causes of natural disasters and to ways and means of preventing them or reducing their effects. The first such study, expected to be prepared in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization, would deal with floods, severe storms and tropical cyclones and their social and economic impact. It is hoped that this will be followed by similar documents on earthquakes and landslides (for which the co-operation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization will be sought) and on other natural disasters. This series of studies, to which other agencies will be invited to contribute, aims at stimulating interest in the scientific and technical as well as administrative measures which are essential to preventive programmes and should in all cases be combined with preparedness measures.

6. The Office of the Co-ordinator, together with a number of the specialized agencies and other bodies of the United Nations system - including the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Health Organization, the International Telecommunication Union and the World Meteorological Organization - and with the participation of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, held a series of discussions with the United Nations Environment Programme to determine the scope of that Programme's involvement in disaster-related matters. It was agreed that the latter's interest lies in disaster mitigation and prevention, defined as measures geared to preventing natural phenomena from resulting in major disasters. It was further agreed that one of the main gaps in this field was the need for a clearing-house for the collection and dissemination of information on (a) the present "state of the art" of disaster-related activities; (b) the formulation of recommendations for the application of existing knowledge to specific situations; and (c) the identification of gaps requiring further work on the part of the international community.

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7. In addition to its contacts with many organizations and programmes within the United Nations system, the Office of the Co-ordinator has also been in contact with many outside institutions already active in fields related to disasters. These include the Smithsonian Institution, the United States National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences, the Royal Society, the Union of International Associations, a number of universities and professional associations, and many non-governmental organizations.

8. The list of agencies given above, which is far from being exhaustive, is an indication of how vast the field of pre-disaster activities actually is. The Office of the Co-ordinator has hardly scratched the surface as yet, but hopes to do more as resources permit. The Co-ordinator's policy is to seek to accomplish more by developing co-operation with other organizations so that all expertise already available is fully known and utilized.

9. The need for action in the field of disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness cannot be disputed. The general lack of awareness of disaster risks shown in many disaster-prone countries (both developed and developing), if nothing else, points to the need for a broad approach, starting with detailed vulnerability analyses, which do not exist at present in most places but which should provide the basis for disaster prevention and preparedness activity. The concern shown by the various agencies involved, particularly within the United Nations system, and the warm support they have given to the Co-ordinator in his attempts to promote activities in this field in accordance with his mandate under General Assembly resolutions 2816 (XXVI) and 2959 (XXVII) are most encouraging.

III. MOBILIZATION AND CO-ORDINATION OF RELIEF

A. Relations with donors

10. As reported to the Economic and Social Council and to the General Assembly last year (see E/5151 and A/8854), much attention has been devoted to the development of close relations with donors, including Governments, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations, with a view to the most effective mobilization and co-ordination of relief in disaster situations.

11. Following direct consultations, a number of Governments have already responded to the invitation addressed by the General Assembly (resolution 2816 (XXVI), para. 9) to potential donor Governments "to consider and to continue offering on a wider basis emergency assistance in disaster situations" and "to inform the Disaster Relief Co-ordinator in advance about the facilities and services they might be in a position to provide immediately". This information is recorded in an information bank maintained by the Office of the Co-ordinator. In particular disaster situations, Governments have also responded to calls made upon them by the Secretary-General or, on his behalf, by the Co-ordinator. As time and resources permit, contacts will be extended to more Governments.

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12. Co-operation with international organizations has also developed steadily. Direct contacts throughout the year between the Office of the Co-ordinator and individual organizations and programmes within the United Nations system culminated in an ad hoc interagency meeting on disaster relief held at Geneva on 19 and 20 March 1973. There was general agreement that collaboration between the Office and other organizations was satisfactory. The consensus was that pre-disaster planning was of cardinal importance and that organizations should encourage and fully associate themselves with the initiative of Governments to establish standing national machinery responsible for the full range of pre-disaster contingency planning. It was agreed that, as appropriate, organizations should consider measures to work out the details of their co-operation with resident representatives of the United Nations Development Programme and other bodies concerned with disaster situations at the field level. It was further agreed that a revised version of the 1971 document entitled "International action in cases of natural disaster: a manual on the resources and procedures of the United Nations family" (ESA/OTC/4) would be issued, setting out the responsibilities of the various agencies in relation to disasters, and that these organizations would make express arrangements for collaboration with the Office of the Co-ordinator, particularly to permit contact with it at any time of the day or night.

13. Relations with non-governmental organizations concerned with disaster relief have also been strengthened. In particular and as hitherto, close collaboration has been maintained with the League of Red Cross Societies and mutual consultation has become habitual. A number of voluntary agencies made a collective approach to the Co-ordinator to establish systematic arrangements for co-operation in disaster situations. With others, arrangements have been concluded individually.

14. The Office of the Co-ordinator will henceforth be in a position to provide an information service to donors, whether these are Governments or international or non-governmental organizations. Arrangements have been made with the United Nations Development Programme for resident representatives to act in the field on behalf of the Co-ordinator and instructions have been issued to them by the Administrator of the Programme regarding this role. Reports on disaster situations and relief needs are forwarded by telex or cable to the Office of the Co-ordinator by the resident representatives, who may be assisted in this task in major disasters by an officer dispatched from the Office in Geneva. It is thus possible for the Co-ordinator to keep a wide circle of potential donors supplied with increasingly precise information on what damage has been done, what help is required, what help is being supplied and what help is not required in a particular disaster situation.

B. Relief co-ordination

15. The report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its twenty-seventh session on assistance in cases of natural disaster and other disaster situations (A/8854) contains an account of the assistance provided by the United Nations in disasters which occurred during the first few months of the existence of the Office of the Co-ordinator. The report described aid given to Mauritius,

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Madagascar, Peru, Haiti and the Philippines and the details will not be repeated here. Since the preparation of that report, the Co-ordinator has taken action in the disasters described below.

Pakistan

16. An earthquake in the mountainous northern area of Pakistan, near Gilgit, in September 1972 caused considerable damage and loss of life. The United Nations Children's Fund, which was already operating an extensive programme in Pakistan, utilized an allocation from the Working Capital Fund, through the Office of the Co-ordinator, for the provision of tents, blankets, drugs and diet supplements. A shipment of 3,000 blankets from the warehouse of the United Nations Children's Fund at Copenhagen was transported by air free of charge through arrangements made by the Office.

Philippines

17. In October 1972, following catastrophic floods which had occurred in July and August, there was a major outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 14 provinces of the Philippines and the Government made an urgent request for vaccines. The Co-ordinator consulted the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and with the aid of an allocation from the Working Capital Fund and with free air transport arranged for by the Office a consignment of 420 kilograms of vaccines was shipped to the Philippines.

Fiji

18. Fiji was struck by tropical cyclone "Bebe" in October 1972 and powerful winds and high tides caused considerable destruction in some of the islands. An allocation from the Working Capital Fund was obtained and a representative of the Co-ordinator flew to Fiji to make a firsthand assessment of the situation. Emergency food requirements were determined, an allocation from the Working Capital Fund was used for food purchases and an allocation of food supplies was made by the World Food Programme to cover the needs of the population up to March 1973. Advice was given to an emergency committee on the co-ordination of all available resources within the country and from abroad as well as on disaster relief operational procedures.

Gilbert and Ellice Islands

19. The Gilbert and Ellice Islands also were struck and extensively damaged by the tropical storm which struck Fiji. On the recommendation of the Regional Representative of the United Nations Development Programme, an allocation from the Working Capital Fund was made and spent for general relief requirements, which included medical supplies, food, water, tents and building materials.

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Afghanistan

20. Following a severe and prolonged drought, famine on a large scale occurred in the central provinces of Afghanistan during the winter of 1971/72. To help the victims and prevent the recurrence of a similar disaster the following winter, a relief operation known as "Operation Help" was launched by the Government. It soon appeared that the situation was so serious that it required help from all possible sources of assistance. An allocation was made from the Working Capital Fund towards the purchase of 10 one and a half-ton, four-wheel vehicles needed for the distribution of food supplies in the highlands before winter.

Democratic Yemen

21. In December 1972, Democratic Yemen suffered a series of storms and exceptionally heavy rainfall which caused extensive flooding. A request for food supplies was received from the Government through the Resident Representative and the Co-ordinator arranged with the World Food Programme for the necessary supplies.

Nicaragua

22. On 23 December 1972, the capital city of Managua was devastated by an earthquake which resulted in the loss of between 6,000 and 10,000 lives and the total destruction of 85 per cent of the city. Damage was estimated at \$US 1,000 million. Out of a total population of 400,000, more than 300,000 people were evacuated. Help on a massive scale was rapidly forthcoming from Governments and international and non-governmental organizations. Within hours of the catastrophe, a representative of the Office of the Co-ordinator was on his way to Nicaragua to assess the situation, the assistance provided and the additional external aid required. The Office representative provided advice to the Government in setting up a national emergency committee and in the establishment of sub-committees on food, shelter, medical care, water-supply and other vital services. An allocation was immediately made from the Working Capital Fund and used in part to purchase 30 large tents. Air transport for this consignment was obtained free of charge. The Co-ordinator provided advice to potential donor Governments and organizations on the immediate requirements and also, in the light of changing information as the situation developed, on items which were not required. The World Food Programme made an emergency allocation of food to feed 50,000 persons for one month which was later followed by additional allocations. The World Health Organization dispatched an epidemic prevention team comprising five physicians and two sanitary engineers. The United Nations Children's Fund made an initial emergency allocation to provide medical and other supplies. At the request of the Secretary-General, the Co-ordinator undertook a personal mission to Nicaragua in January, followed by consultations at United Nations Headquarters and with international financial institutions in Washington, D.C. He attended the extraordinary session of the Committee of the Whole of the Economic Commission for Latin America held in New York to discuss the Managua disaster. A personal representative of the Co-ordinator, on loan from UNICEF, was appointed in Managua to co-ordinate operations on the spot. As is well known, relief aid in cash, kind

and services, from all sources, has been provided to Nicaragua in very generous amounts, but at the present time more is still needed for rehabilitation and reconstruction. On 26 January the Secretary-General made an appeal to the world community for assistance to Nicaragua.

Iceland

23. In January 1973, a volcanic eruption began on the island of Heimaey near the town of Vestmannaeyjar, which had a population of some 5,700 people or 2.5 per cent of the total Icelandic population. Large-scale assistance was provided by Governments and organizations and the whole population was evacuated without death or major injury. This may be ascribed in part to disaster preparedness schemes drawn up in advance with the assistance of the United Nations. Damage, however, amounted to millions of dollars, and if the island is totally destroyed - still a possibility - losses would be of the order of \$US 75 million, not counting the heavy impact of the disaster on Iceland's fishing industry and economy as a whole. A contribution was made from the Working Capital Fund and used to meet some of the cost of emergency assistance to the victims of the disaster.

Ecuador

24. In Ecuador heavy floods affected an area of about 15,000 square miles (39,000 sq. km.) in February 1973 and rendered 30,000 people homeless. Damage to crops alone was valued at some \$US 20 million. The Office of the Co-ordinator was able to arrange a bilateral contribution of some 30 tons of powdered milk for children and nursing mothers, for which it obtained free air transport from several airlines.

Gambia

25. In March 1973, an area of the Gambia was swept by fires which destroyed five villages and much property including a large number of livestock. The situation was further aggravated by a serious drought which prevailed in this and nearby countries. While no loss of life was reported, approximately 5,000 people were rendered homeless and deprived of their means of subsistence. The Government requested aid from the United Nations and the League of Red Cross Societies. The World Food Programme immediately made food grains available and, on the recommendation of the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme, an allocation was made from the Working Capital Fund for the local purchase of various relief items.

IV. CONCLUSION

26. It will be recalled that the General Assembly, in resolution 2816 (XXVI), requested the Secretary-General to prepare for the Economic and Social Council at its fifty-third session a report on any further steps which may be required to

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enable the Co-ordinator adequately to perform the functions entrusted to him. That report was to take into account any relevant suggestions and the experience gained by the Co-ordinator. While at the time of the Council's fifty-third session the Office of the Co-ordinator had not been in existence for a sufficient time to base any such suggestions upon experience, it is now possible, a year later, to suggest certain steps which may improve the functioning of the Office.

27. Paragraph 2 above refers to the fact that, owing to the limited number of his staff, the Co-ordinator has been able to assume only gradually the responsibilities assigned him by the General Assembly. The Office of the Co-ordinator has had some difficulty in discharging its basic functions, not to mention certain activities which it had to postpone or could not pursue as vigorously as desired. The Secretary-General, in an effort to improve the situation, has made additional staff available on a temporary basis in 1973, beyond that authorized as part of the permanent establishment. He has also made provision in the 1974 budget estimates for a significant increase in the permanent establishment for the Office of the Co-ordinator. While such strengthening of the Office of the Co-ordinator, if approved by the General Assembly, will put him in a better position to fulfil his obligations, it will still not enable the Office fully to carry out its functions for some time to come, particularly in such fields as the "collection and dissemination of information concerning technological developments".

28. One further step which would contribute to making the operation of the Office of the Co-ordinator more rational would be the normalization of the procedure under which emergency assistance can be provided to disaster-stricken countries. Under the present system, such assistance is made possible through withdrawals from the Working Capital Fund, which the Secretary-General is authorized to make within certain limits under General Assembly resolution 2816 (XXVI). While such recourse to the Working Capital Fund was understandable at a time when the scope and frequency of such emergency needs were not clearly known, a pattern of action has now emerged which seems to indicate that such emergency assistance is needed to meet major disasters and that these will seldom be fewer than some 15 in any given year. ^{1/} In these circumstances the Secretary-General considers that there are good grounds for including in the regular budget of the United Nations an appropriation for emergency assistance, within limits similar to those which have hitherto governed withdrawals for this purpose from the Working Capital Fund. The Co-ordinator would then be able to make allocations from this appropriation promptly, in cases where immediate emergency assistance is required, without reference to the Working Capital Fund.

29. Regarding the request by the General Assembly that the Office of the Co-ordinator explore various means of providing assistance to Governments in the elaboration of national preparations to meet natural disasters (see paragraph 3 above), it would similarly appear that regular budgetary appropriations may be a simpler way of meeting the requests for assistance from Governments of Member States than withdrawals from the Working Capital Fund.

^{1/} Major disasters for which the League of Red Cross Societies found it necessary to launch appeals numbered 14 in 1968, 16 in 1969, 17 in 1970, 17 in 1971 and 20 in 1972.