



Emergency response unit 2008



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The International Federation's Global Agenda (2006–2010)

Over the next two years, the collective focus of the Federation will be on achieving the following goals and priorities:

Our goals

Goal 1: Reduce the number of deaths, injuries and impact from disasters.

Goal 2: Reduce the number of deaths, illnesses and impact from diseases and public health emergencies.

Goal 3: Increase local community, civil society and Red Cross Red Crescent capacity to address the most urgent situations of vulnerability.

Goal 4: Promote respect for diversity and human dignity, and reduce intolerance, discrimination and social exclusion.

Our priorities

Improving our local, regional and international capacity to respond to disasters and public health emergencies.

Scaling up our actions with vulnerable communities in health promotion, disease prevention and disaster risk reduction.

Increasing significantly our HIV/AIDS programming and advocacy.

Renewing our advocacy on priority humanitarian issues, especially fighting intolerance, stigma and discrimination, and promoting disaster risk reduction.

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Improving the lives of vulnerable people

The mission of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity.

The International Federation is the world's largest humanitarian organization. It provides help and support to people in crisis without discrimination as to their nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions.

Its unique network of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – which covers almost every country in the world – is the organization's principal strength. Cooperation between National Societies gives the International Federation greater potential to develop capacities and assist those most in need. At a local level, the network enables individual communities to be reached.

The International Federation focuses on four core areas where its work can have the greatest impact: the promotion of humanitarian values; disaster response; disaster preparedness and health and care in the community.

Emergency response units (ERUs) form an essential part of the International Federation's disaster response strategy, and they enable the organization to react promptly and effectively to various emergencies.





A global humanitarian network

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is the world's largest humanitarian organization, providing assistance without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. The International Federation's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity.

Founded in 1919, the International Federation comprises 186 member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – with an additional number in formation – a secretariat in Geneva and offices strategically located to support activities around the world. As the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is neutral and impartial, the protective emblems of the cross and the crescent have no religious significance.

Together, the National Societies comprise 98 million members and volunteers and 300,000 employees, who provide assistance to some 233 million beneficiaries each year.

The International Federation, together with the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. All components of the Movement are guided by the Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

The International Federation coordinates and directs international assistance to victims of natural and man-made disasters, to refugees and displaced people, and to those affected by health emergencies. It combines its relief activities with development work to strengthen the capacities of National Societies and through them the capacity of individual people. The International Federation acts as the official representative of its member societies in the international field. It promotes cooperation between National Societies, and works to strengthen their capacity to carry out effective disaster preparedness, health and social programmes.

National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies embody the work and principles of the Movement. National Societies act as auxiliaries to the public authorities of their own countries in the humanitarian field and provide a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programmes. During wartime, National Societies assist the affected civilian population and support the army medical services where appropriate.





Saving lives in emergencies

Disasters devastate lives and livelihoods, and affect hundreds of millions of people every year. It is the more vulnerable who suffer most, with more than 90 per cent of disaster-related deaths happening in developing countries. Years of development can be wiped out in seconds. Often, economic and political instability are compounded and already fragile public services, such as health, water and sanitation, are further weakened. Recurrent crises give people and their crops no time to recover. Emergencies are also becoming more complex, with increasingly long-term consequences.

One way of reducing the impact of crisis on vulnerable people is with good planning and preparedness. This recognition was behind the evolution of the ERU concept and its first deployment in 1994.

The trend of increasingly complex disasters became more apparent in the late 1980s and 1990s. The huge scale of the Armenian earthquake, the massive Kurdish displacement during the Gulf War, and the Great Lakes crisis all placed unprecedented demands on humanitarian organizations.

The idea was to put together pre-trained teams of specialist volunteers – who already knew each other – and pre-packed sets of standardized equipment ready for immediate use in emergencies.

Emergency response units (ERUs) were created to allow a rapid, high quality and standardized response to emergencies.

In the immediate aftermath of an emergency, a country's existing systems can be temporarily overloaded or absent altogether. ERUs are designed to fill this gap. They provide essential services and are flexible enough to adjust quickly to the standards and practices of the affected country.

From an initial idea to provide emergency blankets, the ERU concept has developed into five different modules of highly specialized units, all using standardized equipment and pre-trained personnel. They provide health and water and sanitation services, and support major disaster operations with logistics, IT and telecommunications, and relief. The units are self-sufficient for one month, and can stay up to four months in the affected country.

ERUs soon demonstrated their worth. They speeded up disaster response and enabled the International Federation's secretariat to better coordinate combined National Society operations.

The lifesaving capacities of the ERUs were also demonstrated during more recent disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, which resulted in many pockets of scattered populations in urgent need of assistance. These disasters, as well as the Kenya and Pakistan floods in 2006 and 2007, have also helped the ERUs to further adapt their standardized equipment.

ERUs are now a crucial part of the International Federation's disaster response capacities. They provide an operational platform that is independent, self-contained and flexible enough to meet the basic needs of people in crisis anywhere in the world.



ERUs – part of comprehensive disaster management

ERUs are part of the International Federation's integrated disaster management programming, which deals with emergency response, preparedness and rehabilitation. It is a system that produces both flexibility and coherence to meet the specific challenge of each crisis.

Another important tool used by the International Federation is the field assessment and coordination team (FACT). This is a team of disaster managers that is deployed within hours of a major emergency to assess the affected population's most pressing needs, such as shelter, water and sanitation, food and basic health care. This assessment is often carried out with the support of regional assets such as regional disaster response teams (RDRT).

FACT missions provide crucial support to the response and work of National Societies, and work together with other operating agencies and the local emergency management authorities. FACT missions work with the host National Society and International Federation offices, if present, to draw up a plan of action, which can include the deployment of an ERU.

Disaster preparedness – another core area – helps the International Federation stay one step ahead in this era of increasingly complex disasters. Early warning remains a crucial element in the International Federation's preparedness, and the disaster management information system (DMIS) is an important tool in this respect.

The International Federation's work in disaster mitigation also helps counter the effects of risk to vulnerable people. Such programmes are adapted to local needs, and vary from environmental preservation through to developing social safety nets for victims of socioeconomic and political crisis. Rehabilitation and development of communities is also vital, and disaster preparedness provides a bridge between this and relief operations during the emergency response phase. The International Federation's permanent community engagement enables it to meet such longer-term needs, years after other organizations have moved on.



ERU deployment

ERU deployment is governed by the following factors:

- Magnitude and evolution of the disaster
- Needs of vulnerable people
- Capacity of the host National Society and other available relief capacities
- International Federation resources (human, financial and material) available.

If the response plan recommends the deployment of one or more units, specific requests are made to the Geneva secretariat for the type required, such as water and sanitation or basic health care ERUs. National Societies sponsoring such ERUs will then report their availability.

The International Federation's secretariat in Geneva makes the final decision on deployment, based on the assessment report and advice from technical departments. If the go-ahead is given, ERUs will form part of the International Federation's emergency response and will be coordinated by the relevant team leader.

Once the sponsoring National Society has received a deployment order, all material and equipment is expected to be ready for dispatch within 48 hours. The ERU is operational in the field within a week.

ERU deployments 1996 to September 2007



Map data sources: ESRI, Federation





German Red Cross



Swedish Red Cross



Finnish Red Cross

Immediately upon its arrival in-country, the ERU establishes contact with the affected National Society it is to assist and, if necessary, welcomes Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers to help its work. The ERU operation is closely coordinated with the affected National Society, local authorities and international aid organizations. After a maximum period of four months, the ERU is handed over to the host National Society, delegation or local authorities, who continue the service provision. The ERU members then return home.

Specialized personnel

ERUs are teams of professionals, such as medical doctors, nurses, engineers, logisticians and technicians. Every unit, comprising between three to 25 staff depending on the module, has its own survival equipment, including food, beds, tents, electricity generators, satellite communications and office equipment, which is stored in light, easy-to-carry and often colour-coded containers. On arrival, local professionals, employed through Red Cross and Red Crescent offices, supplement the ERU's core technical staff.

The National Society sponsoring an ERU covers salaries, benefits, insurance, and travel costs of personnel during training and operations. It is also responsible for putting the team together as well as making sure it has the necessary skills and experience. Each member has to adhere to the International Federation's code of conduct for personnel.

Joint deployments

At first, the ERU group comprised 11 National Societies. This number has risen following an upsurge in interest in ERUs since 2005. These new members offer specialized personnel for ERU training and subsequent deployments that are called 'joint deployments'. In such cases an ERU team comprises two, sometimes even three different nationalities, all deploying together in one module.

Standardized training and equipment

Standardized training exists for each of the five ERU modules. All personnel going out with an ERU have received this training from the sponsoring National Societies worldwide, who organize the courses. These are combinations of theory and practical exercises and are generally the same in all countries. These courses are given all year round and are supported by staff from the International Federation's secretariat in Geneva.



All key ERU equipment is standardized, and the secretariat's technical departments and ERU National Societies consistently work together to adapt and improve existing modules. Personal equipment, such as camping gear and emergency food rations, is not standardized and is prepared by the National Society providing the unit. ERUs should be self-supporting for up to four weeks.

As noted, equipment is often handed over to the National Society, International Federation offices or to the local authorities once assignments are completed. Alternatively, the unit may return to its country of origin, depending on needs and future plans.

Standard operating procedures (SOPs)

SOPs are an agreement between the ERU National Society and the International Federation and provide rules and regulations for the mobilization and use of ERUs. They also describe specific field issues applicable to all units. The SOPs apply to all ERUs deployed under the International Federation appeal process, and the National Societies agree to abide by them.

Types of ERUs and their home bases

Logistics

Its function is to effectively manage the arrival of large amounts of relief items - often flown in by air - their clearance, storage and forwarding to distribution points. Also, the unit carries out the procurement of necessary relief items for the operation and is responsible for reporting on those (the unit tracks all incoming goods according to a so-called mobilization table). In addition, the unit supports the clearance of other arriving ERU modules.

On stand-by in Denmark, France, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.



Yoshi Shimizu/International Federation



Swiss Red Cross



Spanish Red Cross



German Red Cross



International Federation

Water and sanitation

There are three modules:

Module 15 (for up to 15,000 beneficiaries)

Provides the treatment and distribution of water up to 225,000 litres a day for a population of up to 15,000 people, with a storage capacity of a maximum 200,000 litres a day. This unit can also provide basic sanitation for up to 5,000 people. The module is designed for response to scattered populations, thanks to a number of smaller treatment units, which can be split and set up as stand-alone units in different locations. Distribution and trucking capacity for the transport of treated water to dispersed populations is also included in this module. The unit can set up nine different storage and distribution points for up to 75,000 litres a day.

On stand-by in Austria, France, Germany and Spain.

Module 40 (for up to 40,000 beneficiaries)

This module provides the treatment and distribution of up to 600,000 litres of water a day to a population of up to 40,000. The unit requires the availability of a suitable local surface water supply. Distribution and trucking capacity for the transport of treated water to dispersed populations is also included in this module. The unit can set up nine different storage and distribution points for up to 75,000 litres a day.

On stand-by in Austria, France, Germany and Sweden. Macedonia and Croatia support Austria and Germany with staff.

Mass sanitation module 20 (for up to 20,000 beneficiaries)

This module provides an integrated response through hygiene promotion (including community mobilization, hygiene education, and operation and maintenance) and basic sanitation facilities (including latrines, vector control and solid waste disposal) for up to 20,000 beneficiaries.

On stand-by in Austria, Germany, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.



Basic health care

This ERU provides immediate curative, preventive and community health care. It can deliver basic outpatient clinic services, maternal-child health (including uncomplicated deliveries), community health outreach, immunization and nutritional surveillance. The unit also has 20 beds for patients needing overnight care. It must have a mechanism for referral of more serious cases for hospitalization, i.e. a hospital within reasonable distance. Existing health care structures are assisted, rehabilitated and further developed. This ERU can serve the primary health care needs of up to 30,000 people, and works with local health staff.

On stand-by in Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Norway and Spain. Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Iceland and Switzerland regularly provide staff for this ERU unit.

Referral hospital

This ERU functions as a first level referral hospital, providing essential services for a population of up to 250,000 people. The inpatient capacity ranges from 120 - 150 beds, providing surgical and medical care, intensive observation, anesthesia and operating theatre, x-ray, laboratory, maternal-child health, pharmacy, sterilization and outpatients clinics. This ERU works on the basis of an agreement with the health ministry of the country affected, and welcomes national health staff to work alongside the expatriates. This ERU can be deployed as small rapid deployment version first, and can then call down additional parts of the full module as and when needed.

On stand-by in Finland, Germany and Norway.

The base camp

In addition to the sectorial ERUs, the International Federation may call upon the base camp, which is a specific support tool for Red Cross Red Crescent staff. The base camp's objective is to provide acceptable living and working conditions for all Red Cross Red Crescent staff engaged in emergency operations in locations where services such as accommodation, hygiene, kitchen and office or administration facilities are not available. It provides tented accommodation conditioned for hot and cold climates, appropriate toilet facilities, hot showers, recreational facilities, a kitchen and offices as well as administrative, IT communication and coordination facilities.

On stand-by in Denmark.



Japanese Red Cross Society



Norwegian Red Cross



Danish Red Cross



Danish Red Cross



Hector Emanuel/American Red Cross



Genald Czech/Austrian Red Cross

IT and telecommunications

This unit establishes local communication networks and links between the field and the secretariat, to ensure the smooth flow of information to assist operational coordination. The ERU has a range of technology such as satellite phones, high-frequency and very high frequency radio systems, depending on the geographical location and local legal situation.

On stand-by in Austria, Denmark, Spain and the USA.

Relief

This unit ensures that essential relief goods are delivered to the appropriate beneficiaries rapidly, effectively and in a well-coordinated and dignified manner. This ERU carries out tasks related to beneficiary targeting, registration, distribution of relief items and monitoring and evaluation.

On stand-by in the Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), Denmark, Spain and the USA.



Looking ahead

The ERU programme is evolving and the major challenge ahead is to keep improving the services the units provide worldwide. While the ERUs were originally established to serve mainly static refugee camps, such operations have become relatively rare in the past decade. In fact, the ERUs have been faced with more and more scattered pockets of population to assist.

This has led to various assessments recommending a more modular approach to the equipment, and greater mobility of the health and water and sanitation modules. Following the 2004 tsunami, a number of these recommendations have been implemented and adjustments made accordingly. This process is likely to continue in the near future.

Another development will be the successful adaptation of ERUs to link up with various regional Red Cross Red Crescent disaster response initiatives. This will give ERUs greater flexibility to respond to specific needs, improve awareness within the Movement, and improve cooperation with the ICRC.

Despite intensive efforts to build disaster response capacity in all National Societies, the need for ERUs is unlikely to disappear, even in the long-term. The number of natural disasters requiring rapid, efficient and effective international response from the Red Cross Red Crescent is increasing, and predictions related to climate change seem to point at possibly even more operations globally.

It is expected that the interest of various National Societies to become part of the ERU group will also continue to rise, thus offering to either contribute with trained staff or the full package of staff and equipment. As a result, there will be a continuous need to standardize training curricula and equipment, and continue the joint deployments. Achieving this will be a shared responsibility of all participating National Societies.

The International Federation's secretariat in Geneva and its member National Societies have gone through significant changes to improve the organization's disaster management capability over the past years. This reform has increased coordination and better equipped the organization to operate in an increasingly competitive aid environment characterized by restricted budgets and more pressure from donors for efficiency, transparency, visibility and accountability. ERUs will be expected to continue demonstrating that the International Federation and its member National Societies are meeting the new, increasingly complex, challenge of disaster response in the 21st century.

Frequently asked questions



Hector Emanuel/American Red Cross

What is an ERU?

An ERU is a standardized package of trained personnel and modules of equipment, which are ready to be deployed at short notice. The units are fully self-sufficient for one month and can be deployed for up to four months. The ERUs are a disaster response tool of the International Federation and the property of the deploying National Society. Participating National Societies currently include those of Austria, Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Japan, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and USA with ERU trained staff provided by Australia, Canada, Croatia, Hong Kong, Iceland, Indonesia and Macedonia.

Why were ERUs developed, and when are they used?

ERUs have been developed to improve the speed and efficiency of the International Federation's disaster response. The units are part of the overall emergency response network and reduce the burden on National Societies and delegations facing a major crisis. They provide a specific support or direct service when local facilities are either destroyed, overwhelmed by needs, or do not exist. As such, they cover a gap until the service is no longer required or until either the International Federation delegation and/or the affected National Society can take over.

How experienced are ERU personnel?

All ERU team leaders and the majority of team members have had previous field experience. They are all professionally qualified, and many volunteer for their National Society while having a regular job. They have all received ERU training and often also followed a Red Cross Red Crescent basic training course.

What makes them different?

ERUs are able to:

- respond quickly to sudden or slow-onset disasters
- provide fast and efficient disaster response worldwide
- ensure that emergency relief is timely and standardized
- assist in the diverse and long-term needs of affected people.

Who owns the ERUs and who pays?

The deploying National Society covers all initial costs (equipment, personnel, training and deployment) while some operational costs in the country affected are paid for by the International Federation. The ERU deployment is traditionally financed by national fundraising campaigns and the European Commission's humanitarian aid department ECHO, as well as support from governments and institutional donors. The ERUs deployed are considered a contribution to the International Federation, and as such the value of the ERU appears in the contributions list of the International Federation's emergency appeal.

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international disaster relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

The International Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.