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Like many countries in Southeast Asia, Cambodia suffers from its share of disasters. Many of these, such as flash flooding and droughts, occur in and around the famous “rice bowl” region of the Mekong Basin on an annual basis, ruining valuable crops as well as lives.

Disease outbreaks have also taken their toll on the predominantly rural population. Last year, the International Federation released emergency funds to support Cambodian Red Cross respond to an outbreak of dengue fever, which affected up to 40,000 people, most of whom were children.

Learning from these experiences will be critical in ensuring that the country is prepared for future disasters, including the ever present global threat of an Avian Human Influenza pandemic.

New laws are needed

Increasingly high on the national agenda is the development of new laws on disaster management and communicable disease control, to ensure that local, national and international responses are supported by a sound legal basis and clear organisational structure.

To this end, the International Federation’s IDRL Programme and the World Health Organisation are launching a new project, funded by the Asian Development Bank, to provide technical assistance to the Government of Cambodia on Legal Preparedness for Responding to Disaster and Communicable Disease Emergencies. Key partners will be the National Committee for Disaster Management, the Ministry of Health and the Cambodian Red Cross.

“We are still facing some challenges in pandemic preparedness,” said Dr. Sok Touch, Director of the Communicable Disease Control Department.

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Revising laws to save lives in Cambodia (cont’d)

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in Cambodia’s Ministry of Health. “We need to find ways of ensuring that communities can report outbreaks as soon as possible. The research and development of new laws could help us find some lasting solutions.”

The project will aim to identify legal challenges likely to affect a fast and efficient response to a major disaster or disease outbreak in Cambodia. It will also review domestic law and systems in light of two key international instruments: the recently adopted IDRL Guidelines and the International Health Regulations. Research findings from the project will be presented to a national workshop, where it is expected the relevant government agencies and other stakeholders will develop a plan of action to address any gaps in the system.

Improving national and international assistance

The Cambodian Red Cross sees great benefit in this work. As an organisation working at community level, as well as alongside national and international response agencies, it sees the challenges from many different angles. “Having good laws and systems in place will help us to get the right information to the right place at the right time after a disaster”, said Pum Chantinie, Secretary-General of Cambodian Red Cross. “But it’s not enough to plan within our own borders. We must also ensure our legal system is prepared for cross-border and international cooperation.”

Indeed, international assistance often brings its own set of legal complications. Other studies conducted by the Federation’s IDRL Programme have revealed that, in many countries, laws can inadvertently create stumbling blocks for bringing in urgently needed goods and equipment, for example when they become stuck in ports and airports for months on end waiting for customs clearance. In the case of an influenza outbreak, such delays could put the whole region at risk.

The World Health Organisation is all too aware of these potential challenges. In 2007, together with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Japanese Government, the WHO took part in an exercise known as Panstop, involving the mock scenario of rapid cross-border deployment of Tamiflu and protective equipment into Cambodia to curb an outbreak of a pandemic strain of influenza.

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ECOWAS promotes better disaster management

Last year, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formed a new Emergency Response Unit (ERU) with a focus both on armed conflict and natural disasters. According to the acting head of department, Ms. Henrietta Didigu, the ERU will be focused on harmonizing standards for emergency response in member states and developing regional cooperation.

The ERU was formed on the basis of the regional Disaster Risk Reduction Plan of Action modelled on the Hyogo Framework for Action. The plan contemplates that ECOWAS will promote effective disaster risk reduction legislation in member states and eventually also assist in the coordination of sub-regional disaster response activities.

“Our first task is to look at systems within member states and then we will begin work on developing cross-border cooperation,” Didigu said.

With support from the United Nations, the ECOWAS ERU has already begun to provide training to member state disaster officials on principles and values and mechanisms for humanitarian assistance.

The ERU is also interested in cooperation with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

“In partnership with the ICRC, we have ensured the adoption of humanitarian laws at the national level. We are also initiating contacts with National Red Cross Societies,” Didigu said.

Revising laws to save lives in Cambodia (cont’d)

“Having good laws and systems in place will help us to get the right information to the right place at the right time after a disaster.”

Pum Chantinie, Secretary-General of the Cambodian Red Cross

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As Dr Shigeru Omi, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific, noted in a press release about the exercise, “Containment of an influenza pandemic has never been attempted before, and we cannot be sure it will work.”

Fortunately, work is already underway on new laws and systems in place to support fast emergency responses. In 2007, the National Plan for Avian Influenza was officially launched, including planning for an influenza pandemic. The Cambodian Government is also in the process of drafting a new Bill on Disaster Management, and there are plans in place for new laws on Communicable Disease Control.

The Legal Preparedness project should make a significant contribution to these initiatives.
CAPRADE reaches out to the Red Cross

In 2002, member states of the Andean Community (CAN) formed the Andean Committee for Disaster Prevention and Relief (CAPRADE) to foster closer regional cooperation in disaster management. From its inception, CAPRADE reached out to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and its member National Societies for advice and support.

“It is a great advantage for us to work together with the Red Cross,” said Ibeth Castro-Goméz, Secretary to the Director of CAPRADE-Colombia. “We benefit from the capacity of the Federation and the National Societies.”

According to Giorgio Ferrario, the Federation’s Regional Representative for South America, the relationship also helps the Red Cross to cement its working partnerships with governments in the region.

“The Red Cross already had an excellent relationship with most of the national civil defence ministries.” Ferrario said, “but based on this relationship with CAPRADE, the Red Cross can work even more efficiently with the governments of the Andean region when a disaster strikes. We know the people, the systems, and the weaknesses.”

The Federation’s South American Regional Delegation has a permanent seat at CAPRADE meetings and has worked on a number of joint projects. These include the development of a regional strategic health plan and indicators for disaster risk reduction and preparedness, in partnership, respectively with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Disaster Preparedness branch of the European Union’s Humanitarian Aid Office (DIPECHO).

More recently, in the wake of some confusion as to procedures for cross-border disaster assistance to Peru after the August 2007 earthquake, the Federation began working with CAPRADE and PAHO to develop a new handbook for mutual disaster assistance between Andean governments. The handbook will address many of the same issues described in the IDRL Guidelines.

In light of the successful work thus far with CAPRADE, the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) has recently contacted DIPECHO and the Federation to collaborate with in the creation of its own regional disaster committee.
In February of this year, the Arab Supreme Relief Committee, a body of the League of Arab States focused on disaster cooperation, met in Cairo, where it discussed the IDRL Guidelines. Dr. Abdullah Al-Hazaa, Secretary-General of the Secretariat of the Organization of Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies ("Arab Secretariat"), was present at the meeting and reported that the IDRL Guidelines were warmly received.

“There was discussion about how to use them to modify their own procedures under the Arab Cooperation Agreement.” Al-Hazaa said. “The adoption of the Guidelines at the global level has helped the committee to realize the importance of its own agreement and the need to become more serious in its implementation.”

The “Arab Cooperation Agreement Regulating and Facilitating Disaster Operations” was adopted by League members in 1987. It calls for disaster affected states to legally facilitate the entry of disaster relief by member states and humanitarian organizations, though special rules on customs, visas, transport, and communications services, among others.

The Agreement also established the Arab Supreme Relief Committee to develop regional response plans and foster coordination in relief operations. National Societies in the region are represented on the Committee by the Arab Secretariat.

To date, 12 of the 22 members of the League have ratified the Arab Agreement, and it is therefore legally in force between them. However, according to al-Hazaa, implementation has been lagging pending efforts to increase ratifications.

“The Guidelines helped the committee to realize the importance of its own agreement.”

Dr. Abdullah Al-Hazaa, Secretary-General, Secretariat of the Organization of Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies
Facilitating environmental responses to disasters

It is well known that major disasters can be devastating to communities, taking lives, destroying homes and workplaces and creating conditions conducive to disease, poverty and insecurity. However, they can also wreak havoc on the environment, destroying critical plants and animals, disrupting ecosystems and contaminating habitats. Unfortunately, environmental needs can sometimes be forgotten in disaster response operations.

Last year, the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies (AGEE), a body of 70 governmental representatives organized to advise the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) on environmental emergencies, decided to launch the “Rosersberg Initiative” to strengthen the global response system for environmental emergencies.

As pointed out by AGEE Chair Chris Dijkens of the Netherlands Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, AGEE members agreed in particular that “action is needed for cross-border assistance in environmental emergencies.” One aspect of this is addressing gaps in the regulatory framework for environmental assistance though the development of new guidelines. In this respect, the AGEE took particular note of the new IDRL Guidelines at its December 2007 meeting.

The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit is currently conducting a baseline legal study and also organizing materials for training and advocacy on responding to environmental emergencies. Roy Brooke, UNEP/OCHA Programme Officer, voiced his confidence that “things will work a lot better” in environmental response, once standardized systems and regulations are in place.

“The current international governance structures in place to respond to environmental emergencies are fragmented.”

Rosersberg Working Group
Governance Systems Background Paper, December 2007

Inspired by the Rosersberg Initiative, the ministries of defence of the Netherlands and Sweden have begun a joint pilot project to create an “environmental support module” by the end of 2008. The module will include a specialized emergency vehicle equipped with a laboratory, rescue equipment and staffed with trained experts, ready to be transported to a disaster-affected country at short notice. Advance agreements will be sought with interested countries to guarantee smooth entry and operations of the module in case of an emergency.
The IDRL Guidelines are finding their way into training courses and policy development carried out by military actors in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (COE) is a U.S. Department of Defense organization whose mandate includes promoting effective civil-military management in international humanitarian assistance, disaster response and peacekeeping through education, training, research and information programs. COE conducts education and training with military forces, primarily in the Asia-Pacific region, on how to coordinate the use of military and civil defense assets (MCDA) to support a civilian-led response to disasters and other humanitarian crises.

Within its courses, the COE informs course participants about the tools and resources available to actors responding to humanitarian crises. These courses now include specific instruction on IDRL, its origins and why the IDRL Guidelines were developed.

Bobby Ray Gordon, Humanitarian Operations Advisor for the COE, sees great value in the IDRL Guidelines as a means to improve consensus and understanding in disaster response. “Initiatives like this are crucial for building bridges and ties among the various actors involved in international disaster response - civilian and military alike”, Gordon said.

Multinational Force SOPs

The COE has also been supporting U.S. Pacific Command military exercises involving humanitarian response components, such as Cobra Gold and Tempest Express, and has been involved in the drafting of procedures for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Multinational Forces Standard Operating Procedures (MNF SOP). The MNF SOP is a development of the MPAT (Multinational Planning Augmentation Team) Program, a cooperative effort by 33 nations around the world to improve multinational military responses in a wide range of areas.

The IDRL Guidelines have also been used during this process. According to Scott Weidie, MPAT Training Branch Manager, the definitions in particular have provided a useful frame of reference for the development of the MNF SOP. The IDRL Asia Pacific Unit has been invited to provide briefings on IDRL to the programme, raising a number of legal and policy issues which are also of concern to the disaster response efforts of multinational forces.

“The multinational military participants in the MPAT program recognize the importance of standardization and the efforts of the Federation to develop the IDRL Guidelines and work to enable the domestic facilitation of international disaster relief operations are a very important to improving disaster relief operation,” Weidie said. “IDRL definitions of key terms have been adopted into the MNF SOP to facilitate common understanding across as broad a range of military disaster relief planners as possible.”
Programme updates

January

- Relocation of the IDRL Asia Pacific Unit from Bangkok, Thailand to the Asia Pacific Zone Office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Presentation to the University of Geneva’s Inter-disciplinary Programme on Humanitarian Action, Geneva, Switzerland

February

- Presentation to the Fourth Workshop for the Development of the ASEAN Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations (SASOP), Pattaya, Thailand
- Presentation at the 2008 International Aid and Trade Conference, Geneva, Switzerland
- Meeting with the Swiss Red Cross, Swiss Development Corporation and Federal Office for Civil Protection on implementation of the IDRL Guidelines, Bern, Switzerland

March

- Three briefings on IDRL for Federation Zone Office Staff and Movement partners, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Presentation to the U.S. Pacific Command & Royal Cambodian Armed Forces Hosted “MPAT Tempest Express-14 Staff Planning Workshop”, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- Preliminary consultations for the IDRL/WHO ‘Legal Preparedness Project’ in Cambodia, Phnom Penh,
- Presentation to the Fordham University International Diploma in Humanitarian Action, Bossey, Switzerland
- Participation in a workshop on international disaster law organized by Cambridge University’s Lauterpacht Centre for International Law, Cambridge, United Kingdom
- Presentation to British Red Cross International Department staff, London, United Kingdom
- Presentation to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism Staff Management Training, Snekkersten, Denmark
- Meeting with the Norwegian Red Cross, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Department of Civil Defense on implementation of the IDRL Guidelines, Oslo, Norway
- Presentation to Norwegian Red Cross international department staff, Oslo, Norway
- NATO’s Civil Emergencies Planning Department included an article written by the IDRL programme on the new IDRL Guidelines in its March 2008 newsletter, available at www.nato.int/ issues/ cep

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Asian Development Bank
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Australian Red Cross
Canadian International Development Agency
Canadian Red Cross

We would also like to thank the following National Societies for hosting recent missions by IDRL Programme staff:

British Red Cross
Danish Red Cross
Norwegian Red Cross
Swiss Red Cross
About the Federation’s IDRL Programme

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies’ IDRL Programme seeks to reduce human vulnerability by promoting legal preparedness for disasters through advocacy, technical assistance, training and research. For more information, please see our website at www.ifrc.org/idrl.

IDRL E-Newsletter Editorial Staff: Victoria Bannon, David Fisher, Siw Dörte Hempfing

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