In this issue:

ECOSOC resolution promotes the IDRL Guidelines

SOPAC conference urges response to the Guidelines

The Colombia Red Cross leads change in DM law

Balkan societies recommit to IDRL advocacy

New Zealand builds IDRL into resiliency planning

High-level workshop in Laos touts legal reform

Special thanks

Programme donors
UN ECOSOC resolution encourages states to make use of the IDRL Guidelines

With the close of its 2008 humanitarian affairs segment, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), made up of 54 member states, adopted its annual resolution on the strengthening of the humanitarian coordination of the United Nations.

Negotiations on the resolution were unusually heated this year, due to a dispute over the emphasis to place on the access of humanitarian personnel, leading to a vote on what has traditionally been a resolution adopted by consensus.

One aspect that was not in contention was language concerning the IDRL Guidelines. The adopted resolution “encourages Member States and, where applicable, regional organizations to strengthen operational and legal frameworks for international disaster relief taking into account, as appropriate, the Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance, adopted at the 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in November 2007.”

This result was supported by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, whose 2008 reports on strengthening humanitarian coordination and natural disaster response highlighted the adoption of the Guidelines at the International Conference and recommended that states make use of them.

SOPAC conference urges response to Guidelines

From July 23-24, 2008, the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) held a conference of member state “CEOs of Finance/Planning and Disaster Management” in Nadi, Fiji. The conference adopted a “call to action” on disaster management as a final communiqué.

With respect to international cooperation, the communiqué notes that there are many international partners available to provide assistance in large disasters, but that coordination remains an issue, both between international actors and with domestic authorities.

The communiqué further states that: “[t]here remains a challenge for Pacific island countries to consider and respond to the draft guidelines for an International Disaster Response Law (IDRL). This requires continued efforts to develop or strengthen legal and institutional arrangements for disaster risk reduction and disaster management with support from regional partners as required.”

The communiqué also welcomed the International Federation’s plans to recruit an IDRL delegate for the Pacific Islands to support them in this task.
The Colombia Red Cross – a leader of change in disaster management law

For more than 60 years, the Colombian Red Cross Society (CRCS) has been engaged with the Colombian government in its disaster management activities. In this interview, CRCS Director General for Relief, Walter R. Cotte, describes its recent advocacy efforts.

How involved has the CRCS been in the current process to update Law 919 of 1989 on disaster management?

It was partly due to our advocacy that the process was launched. We have presented several proposals to the national body of the national disaster prevention and response system (SNPAD), including integration of IDRL into our domestic law and also better planning and economic arrangements to address disasters. Our proposals have been fully accepted by the national director of the SNPAD and by the Ministry of External Relations.

What are the main challenges in updating Law 919?

There are 3 main challenges: The first is to find a common understanding that considers all the norms the ideas, means and capacities of the organisations involved and to establish an acceptable division of labour between the local, national and the regional levels. The second is to ensure the full involvement of communities and the private sector in the process. Third, we must improve our training and educational tools to make our hazard risks and vulnerabilities more understandable and to convert that knowledge into an instrument in favour of the development of the country.

The CRCS was also involved in the development of a recent decree on contingency planning for large public events. What was its contribution?

The CRCS supported and lobbied for more than 5 years for this decree, which is part of the process of the modernisation of the Colombian disaster management system. We participated through providing documentation, sending experts to many meetings, and attending policy-making forums.

Does the CRCS have further projects planned with the Colombian government?

Yes, we plan to build on the synergy of our past cooperation. At the moment, we are working with CONPES (a high level social and economic planning committee of the Colombian government) and SNPAD to adapt the laws and plans to the realities of the country and to strengthen the capacity of all entities involved in the disaster management system, including the Red Cross.

As a National Society, it is our duty to be the leader of change, serving all people and entities that aim to increase the power of humanity and to improve the lives of the vulnerable and the victims.
Balkan Societies recommite to IDRL advocacy

From June 25-27, twelve National Societies met in Sofia for the 16th Balkan Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to exchange experiences and strengthen regional collaboration. Among the primary topics addressed was the promotion of the IDRL Guidelines.

Due to climate change and an increasing occurrence of cross-border disasters, participants underlined the need for stronger cooperation with state authorities on disaster management. “Better work with the governments on the IDRL will help us avoid delays in transferring emergency goods to disaster sites in the neighbouring countries,” noted Montenegro Red Cross Society Disaster Management Coordinator Momcilo Martinovic.

In their final conference statement, the participants agreed “to commit themselves to advocate to the National authorities to review the existing Disaster Management legislation and to continuously promote the IDRL Guidelines” and to foster dialogue with authorities “at all levels” on disaster risk reduction and effective responses to newly emerging vulnerabilities.

New Zealand builds IDRL into resiliency planning

Although major disasters are rare in New Zealand, it is no stranger to a large range of natural hazards. Indeed, the nation’s capital sits directly over two seismic fault lines, so the consequences of a large-scale earthquake could be devastating.

The New Zealand Ministry for Civil Defense and Emergency Management (MCDEM), in partnership with other key organisations such as New Zealand Red Cross Society (NZRC), has developed a National Civil Defence Emergency Management Strategy, with the aim of fostering a “resilient New Zealand.” However, it has recognised that the potential exists for a scale of disaster exceeding national capacities. Consequently, MCDEM is leading an initiative to develop specific procedures for receiving international assistance.

During this process, NZRC has been active in promoting use of the IDRL Guidelines and creating greater awareness of the legal challenges that can arise during international relief and recovery operations. In 2007, it hosted a workshop on IDRL to consider experiences in other countries. This year, it hired a policy officer whose responsibilities will include following up on IDRL.

“It’s clear that if there were a major disaster in New Zealand, it’s likely that we would require some kind of international assistance, and the international community would be quick to offer its support,” said Glenn Rose, NZRC Humanitarian Programmes Manager. “It’s important that we have good systems in place to manage that effectively.”
This month, the Lao PDR National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) together with the UN’s Inter-Agency Standing Committee Country Team organised a high-level meeting in Vientiane to discuss priorities for disaster management risk reduction and the development of a Comprehensive Disaster Management Plan.

Prasith Dethpommateth from the National Disaster Management Office provided a comprehensive presentation on the country profile, hazards and disasters in the Lao PDR. He noted that, “although good practices of disaster risk reduction and management exist in the Lao PDR, the current systems and initiatives need to be strengthened.”

Dethpommateth also pointed out that government institutions dealing with disaster management should be afforded the authority and resources they require to fully execute their responsibilities before, during and after disasters.

Other presentations focused on the current disaster management structure in Lao PDR and regional/international developments such as the Hyogo Framework for Action and the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. The International Federation’s Asia Pacific IDRL Unit presented on the need for improving legal preparedness for disasters, in particular to address issues of receiving international assistance in the wake of a large scale disaster.

Following a series of working group discussions, the meeting concluded that a revision of the legal framework should be a core component of the Disaster Management Plan. Support for its development will be provided through the Federation’s “Legal Preparedness Project on Disaster Response and Communicable Disease Emergencies,” due to commence in Laos soon.

The IDRL team is planning a follow-up visit later in August to continue this process.

Special thanks

The IDRL Programme would like to extend its thanks to the Austrian Red Cross Society for its recent pledge of support.

It would also like to thank Susan Johnson and her team at the IFRC New York Delegation for their excellent advocacy work around ECOSOC and for presenting the IDRL Guidelines to a conference on legal issues in UN peace operations organized in June by the United States Department of Defense.

Finally, the Programme bids a fond farewell to intern Siw Dörte Hempfing, whose diligent work, including on this newsletter, has been much appreciated. Hempfing takes up a new post at CARE International in August.

Grasping the complexity of disaster management in Vientiane
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.

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