Chapter 3
International natural disaster response and the United Nations

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Introduction
The number of people affected by the suffering and devastation caused by natural disasters has been steadily increasing during recent years. According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a total of 608 million people were affected by natural disasters in 2002 alone.1 This is an enormous figure, against which the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that approximately 31 million people a year were affected by complex emergencies.

Within the United Nations (UN) system, the responsibility for coordination of international natural disaster response, as well as UN complex emergency response, rests with the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) who is also the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Disaster response is an issue on which the UN General Assembly has been engaged for over 30 years. From 1965-2002 it passed some very forthright and far reaching resolutions. It has not, however, been able to ensure that they were fully implemented.

The attention that natural disaster response attracts from the humanitarian community has been overshadowed by the post Cold War focus on complex emergencies. Due to the sudden, unpredictable nature of the occurrence of natural phenomena such as earthquakes, cyclones and volcanic eruptions, there are a number of basic differences in the international (and system-wide) response to natural disasters, as compared to complex emergencies, with which most humanitarian actors are more familiar. These are discussed below.

Differences from complex emergency response

Speed of response is critical
In sudden-onset natural disasters, the most extreme of which is a major earthquake, the response time to save lives is measured in hours. In an earthquake, international urban search and rescue teams have to get on site in the affected country within hours, as very few survivors can be expected to survive in collapsed structures after 96 hours. Complex emergency response has no such tight time constraints. Therefore, the initial speed of response in a natural disaster
is an overriding consideration and often determines the success of a response operation. This involves considerable planning, procedures and practice prior to a disaster striking.

**Coordination of response by national governments**

Numerous UN General Assembly resolutions over the years make it clear that the responsibility for response to natural disasters, and its coordination, lies squarely with the government of the affected country. International assistance, whether bilateral or by international humanitarian agencies or non-government organizations (NGOs), can only be provided at its request and to augment its resources. In the case of complex emergencies the situation is different, because often the government itself, or a faction of it, is part of the emergency, or there is no government at all.

**Need for coordination of response assets on site**

In natural disaster response there is a need for coordination of response assets, both national and international, on site. Assets such as urban search and rescue teams, International Federation Emergency Response Units, field hospitals and boats are used extensively at the site of a disaster and their use has to be coordinated there in real time. This, along with the necessity to assist the disaster affected local emergency management authority (LEMA) at district or state level, has resulted over the years in the creation of quick response international coordination instruments, such as UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams. By contrast, in situations of complex emergency, there is a need to coordinate humanitarian programme responses rather than on site assets, in real time. This is a different art altogether.

**Predominance of bilateral assistance**

Unlike cases of complex emergencies, where donors channel substantial assistance through UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs, the overwhelming bulk of assistance in natural disaster response is provided through bilateral governmental channels. For example, during Hurricane Mitch the United States provided approximately US$ 100 million in bilateral assistance to the affected countries within two weeks of the disaster. Such assistance often includes specific in-kind support, such as urban search and rescue teams. Thus in natural disasters, bilateral assistance predominates.

**Use of military and civil defence assets**

Use of military assets by governments for responding to natural disasters does not have the same political implications it has in complex emergency response. Experience has shown that military and civil defence resources can add considerable value to rescue and recovery efforts following natural disasters because of their logistic capabilities and immediate availability. In many developing countries the army and air force are usually the first to respond to a natural disaster.

**The role of the media**

Hurricane Mitch in 1998 was the first disaster to be covered live on television. This changed the parameters of governmental response to natural disasters. The power of this medium to affect the perception of the population about their own government’s competence in
responding to a disaster has resulted in huge pressures on governments to be seen to be doing something very quickly. The visible presence of international response on site often helps the government establish that something is being done. Complex emergencies do not create such rapidly escalating media pressures on governments.

The need for preparedness
It is reasonably clear that the oft repeated humanitarian adage that ‘an emergency is an emergency’ is not quite accurate. Effective response to natural disasters requires a lot of hard work with governments, before a disaster, to build up response capacities and trust. There is no time to do this after the disaster has struck. In complex emergencies, on the other hand, one can join an emergency at any time after it has started and work from that point on quite effectively.

Another extremely important difference between the two types of emergency response is in the field of ‘soft law’. The UN General Assembly has applied itself to the subject of natural disaster response since 1965, especially its relationship with state sovereignty. Therefore, a large body of soft law is available in the form of General Assembly resolutions, passed from 1965 to 2002 and agreed to by all member states, which represents a broad international consensus on the subject.

Development of natural disaster response ‘soft law’ in the UN
The first General Assembly resolution on natural disaster response was passed in 1965. These resolutions are proof of the importance that member states accord to natural disaster response, by creating a body of soft law spanning 38 years and built up by consensus amongst member states.

An examination of these General Assembly resolutions indicates that four main themes run through them:

- The responsibility for natural disaster response in a disaster affected country rests with the country itself. All assistance provided by the international community is in support of the government and on request from it.
- The Emergency Relief Coordinator of the UN (earlier known as the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator) is mandated to coordinate and facilitate all international response to a disaster.
- There is a clear recognition of the need for the UN system to work closely in disaster response with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.
- A consistent effort is needed to improve the capabilities of the international system, especially the UN, for disaster response.

Let us now examine these four themes.

The sovereignty and responsibility of governments
The first theme running through the considerations of the General Assembly since 1965 is that the responsibility for response to a disaster lies squarely with the affected country. It is
interesting to observe that the theme of sovereignty in response to natural disasters did not appear specifically until as late as 1981. The first time sovereignty appears is in the General Assembly resolution on strengthening the capacity of the UN to respond to natural disasters, of December 1981. Paragraph 2 could not be clearer in stating that the General Assembly:

"Reaffirms the sovereignty of individual Member States, recognizes the primary role of each State in caring for the victims of disasters occurring in its territory and stresses that all relief operations should be carried out and coordinated in a manner consistent with the priorities and needs of the countries concerned."

Thereafter, in almost every year, there is a reaffirmation of sovereignty and responsibility of member states. In 1984, 1985 and 1986, the language of the General Assembly resolutions on disaster response is identical:

"Recognizing also that the primary responsibilities of administration, relief operations and disaster preparedness lie with the affected countries and that the major part of the material assistance and human effort in disaster relief comes from the Governments of those countries."

In 1986, a clear increase in the level of anxiety on this issue is apparent in the General Assembly resolution on the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator in which the General Assembly:

"Reaffirms the sovereignty of individual Member States, recognizes the primary role of each State in caring for the victims of disasters occurring in its territory and stresses that all relief operations should be carried out and coordinated in a manner consistent with the priorities and needs of the countries concerned."

By 1988, the language of the General Assembly also started including references to territorial integrity and national unity. The General Assembly resolution on humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters and similar emergency situations states:

"Reaffirming the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States, and recognizing that it is up to each State first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and similar emergency situations occurring on its territory."

This text is also repeated in 1990 in the General Assembly resolution on humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters. Clear language and messages indeed.

By 2002, the language had become even more explicit. The General Assembly resolution of December 2002 on strengthening the effectiveness and coordination of international urban search and rescue assistance states:

"Reaffirming that the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of States must be fully respected in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. In this context humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country."
The role of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator

The appointment of the UN ERC to coordinate international response to natural disasters, who is also the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and head of OCHA, was emphatically elucidated from its beginning. The title of Emergency Relief Coordinator was originally specified in the now famous General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991 (see Box 3.1). With this resolution, for which the catalyst was the Kurdish refugee crisis of 1991, the General Assembly attempted to consolidate responsibility for all humanitarian emergency response in one individual. It therefore combined the responsibility for natural disaster response, then with the Office of the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO), and complex emergency response (then scattered amongst various authorities), with one official – the ERC. It based this office within UNDRO and renamed UNDRO the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA). DHA was subsequently converted into OCHA as part of the Secretary General’s reform of the UN in 1998.

General Assembly resolution 2816 (XXVI) of 14 December 1971 originally created UNDRO and was also one of the pillars on which resolution 46/182 was based.

Later, in 1981, 1986 and 1990, the mandate and focus of UNDRO is again reiterated and reaffirmed. As an example, General Assembly resolution 36/225 of 17 December 1981 on strengthening the capacity of the UN to respond to natural disasters, states in Paragraph 3:

"Reaffirms the mandate of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator, established by the General Assembly in resolution 2816 (XXVI) as the focal point of the United Nations system for disaster relief coordination and calls for strengthening and improvement of the capacity and effectiveness of the Office.

Even the currently much quoted General Assembly resolution 46/182, while merging the functions of natural disaster and complex emergency response, specifically refers to the original General Assembly resolution 2816 (XXVI) in its opening lines. Thus, 46/182 clearly envisaged a continuation of the role of natural disaster coordination that UNDRO had all those years. In fact the new office of the ERC was to be based on UNDRO. This is made very clear in Paragraphs 34 and 36.

The ERC was served by the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) based on the old UNDRO. Within DHA, a separate Disaster Response Branch continued and contained the institutional knowledge of UNDRO. When the UN was reformed by the Secretary General in 1998 and DHA converted into OCHA, the responsibility for natural disaster response remained with the ERC and OCHA.

The General Assembly continued to remain engaged with this issue. As recently as December 2002, it passed a significant resolution on a special subject of natural disaster response; that of international urban search and rescue. Paragraph 5 of that resolution “Reaffirms the leadership role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator in supporting the authorities of the affected state, upon their request, in coordinating multilateral assistance in the aftermath of disasters".
Need for the UN to work closely in disaster response with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

The third major discernible theme which has emerged over the years is the need to ensure that the UN works closely with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in natural disaster response. As early as 1968, Paragraph 3 of the General Assembly resolution on assistance in cases of natural disasters urge:

"the Secretary General, in cooperation with the organisations of the United Nations system as well as the League of Red Cross Societies and other organisations concerned, to consider ways of expanding assistance to Governments in the fields referred to in para 1 and 2 above."

The preceding paragraphs invited governments to make national preparations to meet natural disasters and outline the nature of such preparations.

In 1970 the reference to Red Cross and Red Crescent principles was far more explicit. The preamble of the General Assembly resolution on assistance in the case of natural disasters states:

"Mindful of the principles laid down in the Declaration of Principles for International Humanitarian Relief to the Civilian Population in Disaster Situations, contained in resolution XXVI adopted by the twenty-first International Conference of the Red Cross held at Istanbul in 1969..."

In 1971, in the preamble to the resolution on assistance in the case of natural disasters, the General Assembly recognized "the vital role in international relief played by the International Red Cross." After 1971 there was a decade gap in which the Red Cross and Red Crescent was not specifically mentioned.

In 1981 the importance of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in disaster response and preparedness was once again emphasized by the UN General Assembly. In its preamble, the resolution on strengthening the capacity of the UN system to respond to natural disasters states: "Recognizing also the importance in international relief of the contribution of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies..."

Again in 1982 and 1983, General Assembly resolutions dealing with strengthening the UN capacity for natural disaster response both recognize the importance of the contribution of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and appropriate voluntary organizations.

Even in the all important General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991, Paragraph 36 instructs the newly created UN Emergency Relief Coordinator to "work closely with organizations and entities of the United Nations system, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies..."
Finally, this thread of connectivity with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in disaster response has been reiterated as recently as December 2002 with the passage of General Assembly resolution 57/150 on strengthening the effectiveness and coordination of international urban search and rescue assistance which makes a direct reference to the International Federation's efforts to clarify international disaster response law, albeit with intergovernmental supervision.19

Improving the capacity of the international system for natural disaster response

Since 1965, the UN General Assembly has also applied its collective mind to improving the capacity of natural disaster response, including authorizing many practical measures. Between 1965 and 1990, the General Assembly passed no less than 15 resolutions which contained paragraphs asking the Secretary General to strengthen UNDRO and the international system for natural disaster response.

A typical text is General Assembly resolution of 29 November 1974 which “Calls upon the Secretary General to provide sufficient staff, equipment and facilities to strengthen the capacity of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator to provide an efficient and effective world wide service of mobilizing and coordinating disaster relief”.20

Besides a general call to strengthen disaster response, the General Assembly also suggested undertaking some good practical measures. A summary of some of the important issues on which it passed resolutions asking for action included the following:

■ In 1968 it requested governments to make administrative arrangements to respond to natural disasters including stockpiling relief, training of personnel, communications, early warning systems and preparation of specialized disaster response units.21 At the same time, it asked the secretariat to complete a study on the legal status of disaster relief units made available to member states through the United Nations – an issue which lacks clarity even today!

■ In 1965, it created an emergency grant to enable the release of immediate cash grants to member states affected by natural disasters. The amount that could be released was steadily increased till it stood at US$ 50,000. This figure was reached in 1982 and remains unchanged 21 years later.22 In 1974 it created a trust fund for enhancing capacity for disaster response. This trust fund still exists today, in OCHA.

■ In 1971, it suggested the creation of a roster of experts to be made available to disaster-affected countries at very short notice.23 This measure was ultimately put into effect in 1993, when the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team was created, prompted by the devastating earthquake in Spitak, Armenia in 1988. Today, the UNDAC team has 173 members from 48 countries and has responded to emergencies 105 times in 64 countries since 1993.

■ In 1984, the General Assembly realized the need for special administrative procedures for disaster response and requested the Secretary General “to modify the United Nations procurement procedures as necessary, to permit, on the part of the Office of the United Nations Disaster Response Coordinator, a timely and more effective response to the special and immediate requirements of countries exposed to disasters.”24 This was seven years before
General Assembly resolution 45/182. This demand was also repeated in 1990 and in 1991. It remains unimplemented to date.

In 1990, the General Assembly also asked UNDRO to create a warehouse to stockpile supplies in order to enable UNDRO to respond “in a timely manner to the special and immediate requirements of countries exposed to sudden disasters.” This led to the creation of a warehouse in Fisa, Italy with supplies contributed by donors and managed by OCHA. In the reform of 1998, management of this warehouse was devested to the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

In 1991, resolution 46/182 created a Central Emergency Resolving Fund (CERF) to enhance capacity to address emergencies. CERF was made applicable for use in case of natural disasters in 1994. However, to date there has been not a single instance of CERF funds being used in response to an emergency as a result of a natural disaster.

Where the member states have failed over the years has been in the inability to ensure that the resolutions passed in the UN General Assembly were properly implemented by those responsible, namely UNDRO and its successors. In spite of the preamble and guiding principles of resolution 46/182, making specific references to General Assembly resolutions 2816 (XXVI) of December 1971 and 45/100 of December 1990 as guidance in dealing with natural disaster response, the attention and capacities devoted to this issue have actually declined because of the emphasis on dealing with complex emergencies.

As recently as 2001, OCHA had a separate Disaster Response Branch in Geneva which dealt solely with natural disasters. This branch was the repository of institutional knowledge, expertise and contacts in disaster prone countries and with donor governments, which had been built up over the years since 1965 by UNDRO and DHA.

However, in 2001 an internal reorganization of OCHA combined the complex emergency and natural disaster desks. In this process the Disaster Response Branch was discontinued. That reorganization resulted, perhaps inadvertently, in dissipation of the knowledge and culture of disaster response built up over the decades by the ERC office – a result which was clearly at odds with the repeated calls made by the UN General Assembly.

Conclusion

Enhancing the capabilities of the international system for natural disaster response is a subject in which UN member states have been deeply involved since 1965. As a result, a body of soft law has been built up in the UN on this issue spanning almost four decades. This soft law has been agreed upon by all member states and therefore has the widest acceptability. It also specifies actions that should have been taken to strengthen the system.

Unfortunately, it has not worked that way in practice. The focus of the international humanitarian community on complex emergencies, as well as developments within the UN secretariat in recent years, have actually seen a declining level of expertise and specialization in natural disaster response within the UN system. If 608 million people in one year can be affected by disasters, then this is a trend that ought to be addressed and reversed.
2. United Nations General Assembly Resolution, Assistance in cases of natural disaster, A/RES/20/4 (XX) (1965)
16. Which states, "Recalling its resolution 28/16 (XXVII) of 14 December 1971 and its subsequent resolutions and decisions on humanitarian assistance, including its resolution 45/100 of 14 December 1990."

27. United Nations General Assembly Resolution, Assistance in cases of natural disaster and other disaster situations, Third Committee, A/RES/265/1007 (1971)


