

REPORT

1 The Overseas Development Administration provide emergency relief to help alleviate natural disasters anywhere in the world and man-made disasters in developing countries, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Only short-term relief, including that for famine and refugees, is covered in this Report.

2 In the two and a half years to September 1992 they responded to 150 disasters, involving over 770 separate responses and £135 million. Two-thirds of this sum was provided directly to the countries concerned, usually through voluntary agencies, the rest was channelled through multilateral agencies, such as UN bodies and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In addition, the UK provided £75 million through the European Community. The distribution of relief is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

(Figure 1 is not included in this preprint)

(End p 1)

(Figure 2 is not included in this preprint)

3 The Administration draw a distinction between sudden-onset and slow-onset disasters. The former, such as cyclones and earthquakes, require immediate relief assessments and a rapid deployment of supplies and personnel. Slow-onset disasters, such as famine and drought, require a longer-term and wider-based relief effort, enabling assessment of need to be monitored progressively and continuously.

4 The National Audit Office examined nine cases: two from 1990-91 the Angola drought and displaced persons in Uganda; six from 1991-92 Albania food shortages, Bangladesh cyclone, famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea, Iraqi refugees, typhoon Thelma in The Philippines and an earthquake in Turkey; and from 1992-93, famine in Somalia. The National Audit Office also examined co-ordination arrangements and a number of disaster preparedness projects. These responses consumed 50 per cent of the Administration's emergency relief funding in the two and a half years to September 1992. The results of this examination are set out in Appendices 2 to 5.

5 The National Audit Office visited the scene of the emergencies in Bangladesh and Ethiopia/Eritrea, and had discussions with eight non-governmental organisations in the UK, and the UN Disaster Relief Organisation and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva (Appendix 1).

Organisation

6 The Administration's objectives in providing emergency relief are broad. They are to alleviate immediate suffering from famine and disasters and to save lives.

7 Responsibility for assessing and responding to need in respect of sudden-onset disasters is centralised in the Emergency Aid Department. Longer term disasters, such as famine in Africa and, from April 1992, humanitarian assistance in Iraq, are dealt with on a collaborative basis between the relevant geographical section in the Administration and the Emergency Aid Department.

8 The three major disasters which occurred in 1991 – the Bangladesh cyclone, Iraqi refugees and famine in the Horn of Africa – stretched the Administration's resources.

It was an internal review in April 1991 which led to the establishment of the Emergency Aid Department in August. This incorporated the existing Disaster and Refugee Unit and added a new section, Disaster Planning Policy, to deal with disaster preparedness and the continuing crisis in Iraq. Staffing was increased from six to 12 full-time and one part-time member of staff, of which seven had responsibility for emergency relief.

9 The review also led to an increased emphasis on disaster preparedness and the announcement of a Disaster Relief Initiative. By maintaining close contact with other interested bodies and with non-governmental relief agencies in the UK, this provided the Administration with options for making rapid assessments of need by experienced assessors; appointing field co-ordinators for major disasters; and developing a rapid response capability with disaster relief teams of skilled, dedicated, trained people ready to be flown to the scene of an emergency.

10 Rapid assessments under the Disaster Relief Initiative have so far been put into action three times. An assessor was sent to Turkey in March 1992 following an earthquake

(Appendix 3.6); he recommended that no assistance was required beyond the Administration's immediate response. Following an earthquake in Egypt in October 1992 an assessor

identified an immediate need for hospital supplies and tents. And a series of assessments is being carried out in the former Yugoslavia.

11 These actions have been successful but progress on other parts of the Initiative has been slow. By September 1992, the Administration had spent K420,000 on its development, focusing on preparing registers of suitable personnel, organising training for those registered and providing equipment.

12 With much of the work on establishing the Initiative completed, the Administration re-assessed their staffing needs. Because of the level of emergencies in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, the Administration decided in January 1993 to strengthen their Emergency Aid Department to 18 full-time and one part-time member of staff.

13 Although the Emergency Aid Department now has the capacity to carry out direct assessments of need, in practice it continues to make use of a wide range of existing independent sources of information. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's network of Embassies and High Commissions, and non-governmental organisations overseas provide considerable data. Other information on a centralised basis is also provided by the UN Disaster Relief Organisation and international agencies such as the Red

Cross. The main source of information on food shortages is the Food and Agriculture Organisation's and the World Food Programme's annual crop assessments.
(End p 3)

Response time

14 All eight non-governmental organisations visited by the National Audit Office considered that liaison arrangements with the Emergency Aid Department were good and that responses to their proposals were generally commendably quick.

15 The Administration announced their commitment to spend money on a disaster very quickly after it occurred. Further time was then needed to approve specific proposals.

For sudden-onset disasters approval was usually quick. Decision-making on slow-onset emergencies was affected by the greater amount of information available and the tendency

for needs to change. The National Audit Office found speed of response variable: the Administration took from one day to 62 days to approve the initial requests for assistance.

16 Other than initial responses, the longest time to approve a request related to the Angola drought (142 days). This arose because the Administration needed to satisfy themselves that the goods were appropriate and because of a delay by the Angolan Government in agreeing to free importation.

Delivery

17 There was limited evidence of the dates of delivery of the aid. Where information was available, initial relief was generally provided quickly but delivery times over the duration of emergencies varied widely, ranging from the same day to 13 months. The longest delay was in delivering lentils to Eritrea, caused by a shipowner holding goods as a bargaining lever against an insurance claim.

18 There were few reports of misappropriation of UK relief supplies. While the Administration seek to minimise such losses, they recognise that, in emergency situations, they are sometimes inescapable.

Reporting

19 The level and standard of financial reporting on the use of the Administration's money was good; most organisations produced timely statements. This was not the case for narrative reports, which were often late or not provided. The National Audit Office noted an absence of clear guidelines on reporting requirements and wide variations

in standards many of the reports which were received consisted of long general descriptions without giving all the necessary information. Moreover, although there were indications that some of the reports had been examined by the Administration, there was limited evidence that lessons learned had been identified or fed back to interested

parties outside the Disaster Unit.

20 Most of the organisations interviewed commented that the Administration's current requirements for narrative reports were less stringent than other donors'; they would readily provide reports if they were going to be used. One organisation said that its understanding was that it need provide only accounting information and that no narrative was necessary; most others said that they gave the matter a low priority as the Administration did not follow up outstanding reports and appeared to show little interest in those submitted. The Administration explained that, because of the heavy workload in the Emergency Aid Department, especially during periods of multiple disasters, low priority had been given to pursuing the receipt of narrative reports.

(End p 4)

21 In November 1992 the Administration introduced a standard form of agreement which specifies the accounting requirements and, for the first time, requires interim reports; it does not, however, specify the required content of interim or final narrative reports which is left for decision by the Disaster Unit when a particular grant is issued.

22 The National Audit Office suggest that the reports should include objectives; the aid supplied (with dates); explanations for any subsequent variations; cost of aid; number of recipients; benefits of the aid; problems encountered; lessons learned; and whether objectives were achieved. This could be covered simply in 3 4 pages. The National Audit Office considered that the Administration should press more strongly for such reports, which could also facilitate the assimilation of lessons good and bad for wider dissemination.

Co-ordination and preparedness

23 The enormous range of relief agencies, donor countries and international agencies, all of which need to act quickly in an emergency, creates a considerable risk of confusion

and duplication. The UN has sought to strengthen its emergency response capacity to limit these difficulties. It has created a Department of Humanitarian Affairs and appointed

a Humanitarian Relief Co-ordinator to improve the co-ordination of emergency responses.

24 The 1990s are the United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. All UN member countries have been invited to focus their emergency relief activities on reducing the effects of disasters by preparing for natural hazards, The Administration have spent Z695,000 (0.6 per cent of emergency relief expenditure) since April 1990 on 10 disaster preparedness projects. The National Audit Office looked at five of these (Appendix 5), from which it seemed that these efforts had been largely reactive rather than pro-active.

25 British High Commissions and Embassies in disaster-prone countries have a role in facilitating an effective response by appropriate agencies; and the Administration have indicated a willingness to help with disaster preparedness activities. After the

Bangladesh cyclone the High Commission in Dhaka developed co-ordination procedures which the National Audit Office suggest should be provided to Missions in other disaster-prone countries.

26 The National Audit Office also consider that there is a need, at a national and local level, for all agencies to help people to help themselves, particularly in the hours or days immediately following an emergency until help arrives. Apart from potential reductions in the loss of life and human suffering, there are likely to be savings in cost and response time and improvements in the effectiveness of the aid provided.