

Speech

International Emergency Response during Large Scale Natural Disasters in Asia and the Pacific Region

- Trends and Challenges -

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About OCHA

My presentation today will focus on key humanitarian trends and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, including our recent experience in Thailand and Japan. But before that, let me take one minute to explain a bit about OCHA.

OCHA, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, was created 20 years ago as a part of the Secretariat of the United Nations to enable international humanitarian organisations– including governments, UN organisations – such as UNICEF, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or the World Food Programme – NGOs such as PeaceWinds Japan, AMDA and AAR (Nanmin wo Tasukeru Kai), the Red Cross, the private sector and other partners – work together as effectively as possible to save lives.

OCHA has about 2,000 people working in 45 countries.

OCHA not only responds to meet humanitarian needs caused by natural disasters – including earthquakes, tsunamis, volcano eruptions, and floods, but also to try to lessen the humanitarian suffering created by conflicts and other crises such as hunger and malnutrition. Right now we are supporting humanitarian operations to help those affected by food insecurity in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, negotiating access for humanitarian aid in Syria, and coordinating international assistance in countries that are suffering from protracted humanitarian crises, such as Yemen, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

We do this through assessing needs and agreeing on priorities; presenting those needs in a clear and strategic plan, so that those paying the bills know where their money is going, making sure that everyone gets the best possible information to make decisions (including the people who have been affected by the crisis), working with governments, UN agencies, the Red Cross, NGOs and others to develop common policy on humanitarian issues, speaking out for people when they can't do so for themselves, and reporting on the latest developments in humanitarian situations around the world.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator, the head of OCHA, is responsible for the coordination of all emergencies requiring international humanitarian assistance. That position is now held by Valerie Amos.



Valerie also heads the Inter-Agency Standing Committee or IASC, which is the main forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making involving and including the UN humanitarian organisations, NGO partners and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement.

At the country level, we support the Humanitarian Coordinators or the most senior UN official in the country, who lead the Humanitarian Country Teams comprised of UN agencies and international as well as national NGOs supporting the government efforts. We also make sure that what we call the ‘cluster approach’ functions well. This means that in an emergency, all the organizations that are working in the same sector – food, water, health – are grouped together in a cluster. This means that the United Nations humanitarian agencies, NGOs and government bodies share information, develop common response plans, and divide responsibilities.

We have had an office here in Kobe since 2001, and in January 2012, we decided to renew our partnership with Japan by expanding the Kobe Office and focusing on reinforcing partnerships with Japanese stakeholders, including the DRA members. We hope to maximize resources – not only financial, but also human and institutional – to help other countries respond better to humanitarian crises.

OCHA also has a regional office covering Asia and the Pacific. It is located in Bangkok and is responsible for providing leadership for humanitarian response operations when needed, supporting disaster preparedness work in high risk countries across the region, and strengthening OCHA’s partnerships with Governments, regional organisations, our partner humanitarian organisations, academia, the private sector, and others.

Trends in the Asia-Pacific Region

Around the world, the number and intensity of humanitarian emergencies – and the number of people who need our support – is increasing. At the beginning of this year, we asked donors for \$7.7 billion dollars to help a total of 51 million people during 2012.

The average number of disasters each year has already doubled, from 200 twenty years ago to 400 in recent years. Today, three quarters of all disasters are now climate-related, compared with half just ten years ago. Climate change will pose an existential threat to many communities in Asia, as they are exposed to more frequent and intense floods, storms and droughts.

Natural disasters affected 206 million people in 2011, and Asia is the region most often hit, with 44 per cent of natural disasters occurring here and accounting for a staggering 86 per cent of global disaster victims.

We live in a world of rapid population growth, poverty and income disparity, climate change and environmental degradation, fluctuation of food and commodity prices, and resource scarcity – all of which contribute to people’s vulnerability to disasters and other humanitarian crises in Asia and elsewhere.

Asia’s urban population is growing 2.6 percent annually, and Asia currently does and will continue to house the majority of people in its cities and towns. The complexity of urban space poses various challenges



that demand deeper understanding of the spatial and social structure of cities and the potential for stronger partnerships with various stakeholders including municipal government, civil society and affected communities. While the great majority of tools, approaches, policies and practices for humanitarian responders have been designed for non-urban settings, the IASC, for instance, is discussing how to better address the humanitarian needs of urban populations who get caught up in disasters.

The nature of humanitarian assistance itself is also evolving. The international humanitarian system is becoming broader and more complex in Asia and globally. We see a proliferation of donors – especially the emerging economies and philanthropic organizations – as well as aid organizations. Asia, with its vibrant economy, new technologies and fresh ideas, is really at the heart of the driving force impacting the global humanitarian landscape. But working with all of these actors also put growing pressure on our ability to deliver a coordinated and coherent response.

In 2010, the international response to two major crises – the earthquake in Haiti and flooding in Pakistan – showed that there were some problems with the humanitarian response system. In response, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee adopted a set of changes, aimed at strengthening leadership and improving coordination. They simplify systems and mechanisms, improve inter-agency communication and collaboration, and are focused on the effectiveness of our work. This so-called “Transformative Agenda” has one simple goal – to shift the emphasis of our work so that it is based around impact rather than process.

At the same time, growing economies and capacities mean that more governments, especially in the Asia and Pacific region, are able to fulfill their responsibility to respond to crises and provide relief to affected communities in their own country. They are also increasingly willing and able to provide international support. We, the international humanitarian community, need to face this reality and adapt the existing system to better cater to the needs of Asian nations.

In this regard, I am very happy to hear that the Hyogo Earthquake Memorial 21st Century Research Institute is spearheading a research project investigating the development of an international cooperation framework for disaster reduction in Asia, involving multiple stakeholders including civil society, the private sector and military and civil defense actors. OCHA stands ready to work closely with the Research Institute to optimise the value of this work.

Floods in Thailand last year

Since April 2011, early rains brought floods to southern Thailand. This was followed by the early arrival of seasonal monsoons in May and three tropical cyclones from June onwards. The compounding effects of these extreme weather events overwhelmed water management systems in the country. Starting in mid-September, water overflowed from the spillways of major dams and dykes; flooding the western and eastern river plains.

The unprecedented level of floods has been considered to be the worst in half a century. One fifth of the

country was inundated with water including many parts of Bangkok. As of January 2012 the floods were estimated to have claimed 815 lives, with more than 3 million households, or approximately 11 million people affected in a total of 64 provinces. Floods are estimated to have damaged over 18,000 roads, thousands of drainage structures and bridges, 10.3 million rai (16.5 thousand sq.m.) of farmland, affecting 12.3 million livestock in addition to serious flooding in industrial zones. The total damages are estimated by economists to be THB 1.43 trillion (or USD 46.5 billion).

The Department for Disaster Prevention and Mitigation is Thailand's central coordination body for disasters. When flash floods first occurred in the upper northern provinces of Thailand in early May of 2011, the Provincial Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DPM) Office of each affected province immediately responded. In August 2011, when flooding had expanded to include many provinces in the north and north-eastern parts of the country, DDPM set up the 24/7 Emergency Operation Centre for Flood, Storm and Landslides to coordinate warning and relief efforts with all affected provinces. The Royal Thai Government (RTG) also allocated extra flood-relief budgets to affected provinces. However, the situation became worse as floods covered many provinces in the Central plain, heading towards industrial zones and high density settlements, including Bangkok.

Realizing the scope and severity of the major floods, the Government established the Flood Relief Operations Centre (FROC) on 8 October, as a Single Command Centre headed by the Minister of Justice. DDPM acted as FROC's secretariat and continued its function in coordinating the relief operations in all affected provinces. The Royal Thai Armed Forces were also in the relief and rescue operation.

The Government established the Foreign Assistance Coordination Centre (FACC) under FROC to coordinate the large amounts of incoming bilateral and international offers of assistance. The Humanitarian Country Team in Thailand also coordinated with the RTG through FACC. It should be noted that majority of assistance from the international humanitarian community went through the Thai Red Cross (supported by IFRC) because the RTG did not make a formal request for international assistance (despite specific bilateral requests).

From the Government side, the massive floods of 2011 underscored a number of challenges to Thailand's disaster management system, from early warning (weather forecast), water management, response capacity to communication strategy, just to name a few.

From the international humanitarian community side, the 2011 flood was an opportunity to work with new partners in the RTG, CSO and NGO community, and to focus on disaster risk reduction principles. However, the shift whereby middle-income countries such as Thailand are no longer requesting international assistance (for whatever reasons) was also recognized. In order to remain "relevant", the humanitarian community needs to better understand the implications and prepare to operate accordingly. Lessons learned as a result of these floods have led to the establishment of new and more open standard operating procedures between the Government and the Humanitarian Country Team - adapting to this "new normal".

Lesson Learned from the Great East Japan Earthquake

Like other disasters around the world, the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami brought change. It devastated the lives of many. And it sharpened our perception of the destruction disasters bring. People across the globe watched, horrified, as tsunami waves flooded across your country on live television.

As the scale of the disaster became clear, offers of international assistance began to flood in. One hundred and sixty three countries and other partners, and 43 international organisations offered their support. Twenty nine international search and rescue teams were deployed.

As far as OCHA is concerned, the Government of Japan acted swiftly, calling on us to dispatch a Disaster Assessment and Coordination team, or UNDAC team - one of our key response and coordination services. The UNDAC and OCHA teams were based in Tokyo, supported by our Kobe Office and other staff members from JICA and UN organisations based in Tokyo. With the help of JICA, the UNDAC/OCHA team was able to establish its Operations Coordination Centre in JICA's Tokyo International Centre.

We then collated and disseminated available information around the world in English in OCHA standard Situation Reports – where it was picked up by Governments, news wires, twitter and facebook users and used as one of the key information sources for this disaster. We also helped the Government coordinate 20 search and rescue teams from 15 countries (890 rescuers, 38 dogs). The authorities also sought our advice on how to best accept and manage the incoming international assistance.

Preparedness was a key “lesson learned” from this disaster. Japan was prepared. Look at the figures. This was a massive earthquake, followed by a huge tsunami. Too many people lost their lives, of that there is no question. But, compared with the Indian Ocean tsunami? In Indonesia alone 120,000 people died as a result of the tsunami wave – six times as many as in Japan. People here knew what to do, where to run, not to panic.

Those involved in the emergency response have started reflections on their own experiences. The Cabinet Office has started reviewing Japanese ability and institutional arrangements in receiving, coordinating and delivering international assistance. DRI, through its direct contacts with the disaster affected communities in Tohoku, is also examining concrete mechanisms related to receiving international assistance, especially search and rescue teams, medical teams, delivery of relief goods and support by NGOs. In addition, the Japan Platform, a consortium of the Government of Japan, NGOs, and Keidanren or the Japan Business Federation, conducted a review mainly from a perspective of Japanese civil society.

OCHA, through its Kobe Office, is partnering with all of these initiatives. On 5 July this year, OCHA co-organised a public seminar with the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Japanese Red Cross Society in Tokyo, which brought together all of these actors and allowed a frank exchange of opinions on what worked and what did not. The seminar highlighted the need to further elaborating coordination mechanisms, consistently applying appropriate minimum standards, improving needs assessment and information management and communication tools as well as mainstreaming gender into disaster response. Establishing a

stand-by capacity, standard operating procedures, and human resource development during the peacetime were also emphasized.

Key challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region

Preparedness undoubtedly saved lives – and yet that message needs to be constantly reinforced. Between disasters we quickly forget that we need to remain focused on being prepared. I visited Sendai last year and met people who had supported the immediate response. I asked one man whether there was anything he would like to have done differently. His response was that he wished that he had not become so complacent about the risks posed by earthquakes and tsunamis.

Clearly, preparedness needs to happen at all levels. What we are doing now in terms of promoting disaster response preparedness in the Asia-Pacific region is on two fronts. One is to develop a ‘Guide for Disaster Managers on Humanitarian Tools and Services in Asia and the Pacific’, which will provide a handy reference to disaster managers on how to request, receive and manage international assistance and support tools and services. Japan clearly knew these relatively well and requested what they needed selectively. Building on this experience, we are working very closely with the Government of Japan and JICA and the Asian Disaster Reduction Centre in the development of this Guide.

The other is to ensure that the Humanitarian Country Teams are well equipped with coordination tools and services so that they can respond once a disaster hits and the government asks for support. This includes ensuring that the cluster system is up and running, situation reports are issued, necessary resources are mobilized and so on.

Strengthening the established coordination systems and existing international standards is crucial. Excellent collaboration between Japan and the UN would not have been possible were it not for Japan’s active membership in the UNDAC team and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group. Perhaps similar efforts could be expanded beyond the area of urban search and rescue, taking into consideration the realities of disaster threats in Asia.

Another important area of coordination is with the military. Military forces play an increasingly important role in disaster response and we often interact with them when we work in conflict zones. Again, as you saw, the Japanese Self Defence Force, together with other foreign forces, played a crucial role in saving lives, especially in the early stages of the 3.11. We need to encourage dialogue between civilian and military actors especially before a disaster strikes, so that we protect and promote the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. We would like to see more open and active debate on humanitarian civil-military coordination in and from Japan.



We must do more to understand and work with the private sector, especially those companies that are developing new tools and technologies that can help us in our work. Our work relies on communications and logistics. For instance, we partner with Google to advance technological innovations that help first responders better identify needs and plan response activities. Following 11 March, you saw private companies across Japan mobilise their staff and resources to contribute to the response and recovery efforts. Building on this experience, I see a huge potential for deepening humanitarian partnership with the private and voluntary sector in this country and in the wider region.

Promoting regional cooperation is key to enhance disaster response and preparedness in Asia. OCHA is working closely with ASEAN, SAARC, and PIF. In particular, capacity building of the ASEAN Coordination Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management or AHA Centre is one of the top priorities and we encourage expanded and more coherent support from Japan, such as through the utilisation of the Japan ASEAN Integration Fund.

We also need to collectively place a higher priority on working with national NGOs and their networks, such as the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network.

Consistent availability of quality information to support decision-making remains a challenge for the humanitarian community. We need to collectively work harder and more consistently to make sure that we have the right information at the right time, and also communicate better with affected people. Needless to mention, Japan with its experience during 3.11, has a lot to offer in this domain.

Another challenge is about making sure that aid addresses the different needs of different groups. All too often we see disaster survivors simply as a mass of people. We know that there are men, women, girls and boys amongst them. We know that some of them are likely to be old, young, disabled. All have different requirements. But, despite our efforts there is still only weak commitment to gender-sensitive programming in humanitarian organizations, and we need to continue to improve. Governments also need to ensure that they apply a gender-sensitive approach in designing their disaster strategies and plans. In this regard, I would like to highlight the fact that in March this year, the resolution on ‘Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women in Natural Disasters’ was adopted by the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women. I commend Japan’s role in promoting this very important agenda, and look forward to continue working with Japan to achieve real progress on this matter.

Way forward

Finally, Japan is now both a donor and a recipient of international assistance. You understand both these perspectives deeply, from the inside. I believe this puts Japan in a unique position to contribute to the international debate and enhance the accountability of the international humanitarian system.

In Japanese and Chinese, and perhaps in other languages as well, the word CRISIS means ‘danger’ and ‘opportunity’, and I think this exactly represents where we stand in our efforts in Asia. The relative wealth and

power of nations is clearly shifting, from west to east and from north to south. The era when the international humanitarian system was dominated by a few countries and aid agencies from the west is over. Asia has a lot to offer, to help the rest of the world be better prepared to respond to disasters.

Japan is one of the world leaders in disaster response and preparedness, because of its geological and geographical location and its determination to use the lessons from each disaster to plan for the next one. It is vital that Japan, with its expertise, wisdom and resilience, continues to play a key role in promoting humanitarian assistance and disaster management, and shares the responsibility for leading international cooperation in these areas.

It is in this spirit, we co-hosted with the Government of Japan the World Ministerial Conference on Disaster Reduction in Tohoku together with ISDR and UNDP in July this year. In this conference, the Government leadership expressed its strong commitment to helping to build resilient societies across the world, and announced its pledging of \$3 billion to support developing countries in field of disaster reduction over the next three years. In this conference, the importance of setting up institutional arrangements in advance, including building frameworks for a swift and smooth acceptance of international assistance, was stressed. We look forward to working closely with the Japanese Government and other Japanese stakeholders to realise this vision together.

Here in Kobe, all DRA members have huge roles to play. As far as DRI is concerned, as a specialized think tank focused on disaster management in Japan, we look forward to its continued intellectual contribution to the international humanitarian research and policy debate. This will help us ensure that the views of Asia and, crucially, disaster affected communities are better reflected in the international humanitarian debate. The international community is eager to hear of your findings and possible solutions. OCHA Kobe stands ready to facilitate this kind of mutual learning by bridging between you and the rest of Asia and the world.

Finally, the earthquake and tsunami in Japan last year showed that no country can be completely immune to the effects of disasters. Time and time again, we have seen the effect that putting in place effective preparedness measures can have in reducing loss of life in an emergency. Strengthening preparedness means many different people must be involved. But most of all, it has to involve local communities and ordinary citizens. In order to get this message across more widely, together with the United Nations Development Programme, we have developed an animated film. I would like to conclude my presentation by watching this film with you, and I would be happy to take any questions from the floor after that.

Thank you very much.