Towards a stronger European disaster response: the role of civil protection and humanitarian assistance

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PURPOSE: to propose a strategy with a view to improving the European Union’s disaster response.

BACKGROUND: whether it is an earthquake in Haiti or floods in Pakistan, the EU Member States and EU institutions have responded well to the many disasters that have struck this year, both in the EU and further afield. The quality of this response has helped to demonstrate to EU citizens and Member States the added value brought by EU actions in the field of crisis response.

At the same time, demands on the EU’s disaster response capacity are likely to increase, as disasters continue to grow both in size and frequency. Current budgetary pressures also call for further efforts to promote an efficient use of scarce resources.

The Lisbon Treaty offers an opportunity to build a stronger, more comprehensive, better coordinated and more efficient disaster response capacity in the European Union drawing on the **following guiding principles**:

- the EU should be able to respond effectively and in a spirit of solidarity to disasters both inside and outside the EU;
- the EU disaster response capacity should address all types of disasters (i.e. natural and man-made, other than armed conflicts) that overwhelm national response capacities and result in a need for EU assistance;
- a fully coherent approach for disasters outside the EU will need to bring together the different constituencies that could possibly be deployed (depending on the nature of the crisis);
- when responding specifically to humanitarian needs caused by disasters outside the EU, EU assistance is bound to act in accordance with internationally agreed humanitarian principles;
- an approach that balances response with disaster prevention and preparedness is the best way to respond to the increasing threats posed by disasters.

Improved cost effectiveness can be achieved through a better pooling of assets in order to reduce costs and avoid a duplication of efforts.

CONTENT: building on the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (2007),the Communication on Reinforcing the Union's Disaster Response Capacity (2008), this communication focuses on **civil protection and humanitarian aid** which are the two main instruments at the EU’s disposal to ensure rapid and effective delivery of EU relief assistance to people faced with the immediate consequences of disasters.

This Communication should be seen as the **first building block** of a broader and more coherent effort towards a strengthened EU disaster response. Legislative texts will be proposed in 2011 to implement the key proposals.

The Communication proposes:

1) The creation of a European Emergency Response Capacity based on pre-committed Member States' assets and pre-agreed contingency plans: the EU needs to shift from *ad hoc* coordination to a system where advance planning allows core assets to be available for immediate deployment. In order to improve planningof EU civil protection operations, the Commission proposes to: i) develop reference scenarios for the main types of disasters (including chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) and cross-border terrorist attacks) inside and outside the EU; ii) identify and map key existing assets that could be made available by Member States for the EU emergency response to these scenarios; iii) develop contingency plans for the deployment of these assets.

To enhance the **availability of key assets**, the Commission proposes a pooling of pre-identified civil protection assets from the states participating in the Civil Protection Mechanism that are voluntarily made available for EU disaster relief operations both inside and outside the Union.

The Commission also proposes:

- improving the prepositioning of relief assets by reinforcing the rapid availability of assets for humanitarian actors in external emergencies;
- ensuring that needs are assessed on time and with precision so that decisions on the assistance to be provided are based on reliable information;
- deployment of the Technical Assistance and Support Teams more systematically, especially in situations where local infrastructure has collapsed, and develop contractual arrangements to ensure their guaranteed availability;
- simplification and reinforcement of existing arrangements for the pooling and cofinancing of transport assets to ensure the delivery of aid to the countries affected, as well as its delivery to the precise area where it is most required;
- the development of the European Emergency Response Centre as the Commission's operational emergency relief interface with the CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) coordination tools.

2) The development of an Emergency Response Centre: the Commission will merge the Civil Protection and the DG ECHO crisis rooms to create a genuine **24/7** European Emergency Response Centre. The centre will ensure a continuous exchange of information with both the civil protection and humanitarian aid authorities on the needs for assistance and the offers made by EU Member States and other actors. This will ensure that Member States can make informed decisions on funding and offering additional assistance. The centre will also develop reference scenarios for the main types of disasters inside and outside the EU.

Stronger EU co-ordination will reinforce the UN’s role by ensuring a coherent EU contribution to UN-led relief efforts. It is also important that EU funding, through international and local partner organisations, is properly **acknowledged and visible** in situ (except in cases where the presence of EU symbols would make the delivery of aid more difficult) and on the internet.