More Focus on Disaster Risk Reduction in the Arab Region

Several countries in the Middle East/North Africa region have begun prioritizing disaster preparedness and established national databases to estimate their level of risk and improve response.

The second edition of the Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction - launched in May by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon - highlights that Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen have all recently completed national disaster loss databases. Similar national databases are expected to be completed soon in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and Djibouti.

Disaster reduction experts welcome this development as the region is highly vulnerable to natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, landslides and drought. According to a 2010 report by Arab environment ministers, the region has suffered 276 disasters in the last 25 years, in which 100,000 people died, 10 million were affected and 1.5 million left homeless.

“Disaster risk reduction has not been a priority for governments until recently so this commitment is relatively new. We have witnessed various levels of progress in the region, but overall it is still lower than global levels,” said Luna Abu-Swaireh from the Cairo office of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), to the humanitarian news agency IRIN.

According to the report, drought is a persistent risk in the region with especially agricultural production affected on a regular basis. Floods also increasingly cause death and economic loss but countries are not reducing the vulnerability of their populations at the speed necessary to address the increased exposure, says the report.

The region is also prone to earthquakes because of the Jordan rift valley system which extends north through several countries and territories from the Red Sea. About two-thirds of Jordan’s population, the entire population of Lebanon and a large urban population in Syria live within 50km of a fault line.

Civilians and humanitarian Aid under Fire in Yemen

The escalation of violence in Yemen towards the end of May and into June prompted the Humanitarian Country Team in Sana’a to issue a statement 3 June urging an immediate halt to the fighting and respect for International Humanitarian Law.

“International Humanitarian Law (IHL) clearly requires parties to a conflict to take all necessary measures to avoid fighting in civilian populated areas, in keeping with the key IHL principle of distinction between civilian and military targets, as well as to avoid collateral damage,” the statement read.

“Humanitarian actors, including medical personnel, involved in the vital delivery of humanitarian and medical aid are being targeted and obstructed by armed groups […] The targeting of civilians and the obstruction of humanitarian aid constitute a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law to which all parties are bound”.

The Humanitarian Country Team said that large numbers of people are being displaced due to the heavy fighting and that at least six schools have been used for military purposes by warring parties, also contravening IHL.

http://unocha.romenaca.org/yemen
Vouchers keep Food Moving despite Syrian Unrest

The World Food Program’s (WFP) new food voucher system has kept functioning in the Syrian town of Lattakia as well as in other parts of the country, despite the increasing unrest of recent months. The turmoil initially disrupted the distribution of food to 1,200 Iraqi refugees living in Lattakia but WFP’s Electronic Voucher System (EVS) was rapidly re-established.

The EVS delivers food assistance in the form of mobile phone text messages with a PIN number to be cashed in at selected government shops for food.

When the unrest in Lattakia began, movement was highly restricted and the only shop providing food for the EVS recipients was looted in the early days. WFP’s communication equipment was stolen and the EVS system could not run. Suddenly, Iraqi refugees couldn’t “buy” their food.

The three-member Commission expressed its concerns about these violations perpetrated by both sides of the conflict, and urged each side to fully implement and adhere to international human rights and international humanitarian law.

The report is the result of a fact finding field mission to Libya including to opposition-held Benghazi and the capital Tripoli. The Commission met with the Government of Libya and the National Transitional Council, civil society and individuals throughout the country. It met with over 350 people in the field, including 113 doctors and other medical staff, patients in ten hospitals, people detained in Tripoli and Benghazi and with people displaced either within Libya or in transit sites or refugee camps outside it. The commissioners also reviewed 5,000 pages of documents, more than 580 videos and over 2,200 photographs.

On the basis of the research, the Commission evaluated the allegations of violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law such as excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture, interferences with freedom of expression, sexual violence, attacks on civilians including medical personnel and journalists, and attacks on civilian and humanitarian installations such as medical facilities, and attacks on migrant workers. It also examined the use of mercenaries, the use of child soldiers and of prohibited weapons.

The nature of the EVS system, and strong collaboration with implementing partners, allowed for an instant solution setting up a new shop in a more secure location with new equipment through remote guidance from WFP staff. Beneficiaries were then directed via text messages to the new shop.

“The EVS has made it much easier for us to continue delivering remotely amid volatile situations without putting our safety at risk,” said Muhannad Hadi, the WFP Syria country director. “The traditional in-kind food distribution system, given the current circumstances, would have placed the well-being of WFP’s staff and beneficiaries at serious risk, or worse, impeded WFP from reaching the beneficiaries. The EVS was able to supply 92 per cent of its beneficiaries in Lattakia with food assistance.”

The EVS is implemented in 34 shops across Syria, including three mobile shops to reach Iraqis living in remote areas of north-eastern Syria and the Damascus countryside. Starting July 2011, 100 per cent of targeted 115,000 refugees across Syria will be assisted through this modality.

The current emergency operation has been implemented since May 2010. Due to the ongoing deterioration in the vulnerability of refugees and their dependency on food assistance, the operation has been extended for an additional eight months period, from May to December 2011.

UNICEF alarmed about Children in Syria

On 31 May, the UN children’s fund UNICEF issued a statement calling for immediate efforts by all parties in Syria to spare civilians, particularly children and women, from violence as the death toll in Syria increases.

“Since mid-March, reports of children injured, detained, displaced and at times killed have been increasing. While UNICEF cannot verify the reported cases and events, we are particularly disturbed by the recent video images of children who were arbitrarily detained and suffered torture or ill-treatment during their detention leading in some cases to their death. We call on the government to thoroughly investigate these reports and ensure that perpetrators of such horrific acts are identified and brought to justice,” the statement read. It added that “the use of live ammunition against demonstrators has reportedly left at least 30 children dead”.

Kyrgyzstan: Humanitarian Response phasing out as Early Recovery takes over

One year after the outbreak of communal violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, which took the lives of 470 people and displaced 300,000, a fragile peace is settling in as the humanitarian community is preparing to move out.

Having provided various kinds of aid to the conflict-affected populations, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) has agreed to wrap up their emergency programmes and hand over their activities to the development community. The Kyrgyzstan Coordination Transition Strategy is being finalized, and the HCT is set to have its final meeting at the end of June this year.

The people of Kyrgyzstan are also feeling that the time of early recovery has finally come: most of the damaged houses and other property have been restored, businesses are re-opening, and the streets of the conflict-ravaged city of Osh are bustling again.

On the eve of the one-year anniversary of the conflict, two families – one Kyrgyz and one Uzbek - share their very similar stories. Sitting on the floor of their transitional shelters, the women recall their stories from last year. As violence erupted in Osh, both families fled - some to Uzbekistan, others to relatives inside Kyrgyzstan - with what belongings they could grab on their way only to come back a few weeks later to find their houses burned to the ground. While they stayed with relatives in nearby safer districts - sometimes over thirty people would be sharing one house - the women would eventually begin to come back on a daily basis to what used to be their homes and wait for help from by-passers.

Meanwhile, UN agencies and international NGOs had rushed to southern Kyrgyzstan to support local organizations and authorities with the humanitarian crisis.

Gulnara Kozybaeva remembers the first aid workers who came by and took her to the market to pick the most necessary items. A mother of four, Ms. Kozybaeva mostly got clothes for her children. While she cannot remember all of the aid and organizations that walked her family through the volatile post-conflict period, Ms. Kozybaeva says they always received what they needed.

The Dzhurabaev family also remembers the very first aid worker who came to comfort the women and tell them that their houses would be restored. Since then, the family has moved into a new home and welcomed the fourth daughter-in-law to their thirteen-member household.

While these families acknowledge that their lives are stabilizing, they are still concerned about the future. Some women are still accompanying men outside to prevent arbitrary detentions of their husbands; some families are trying to re-integrate into their communities but face problems with authorities because they do not have proper documentation such as identity cards, record of service or title deeds; some children are still coping with stress and trauma triggered by witnessing atrocities or because they live in a household where their parents were physically or emotionally affected by the violence.
To address these residual challenges, humanitarian and development organizations in Kyrgyzstan are working closely together with official government structures to ensure a smooth transition from humanitarian relief to early recovery interventions.

Pakistan: Cash-for-Work Project helps Flood-affected back on their Feet

With funding from the OCHA-managed Emergency Response Fund (ERF) in Pakistan, families who lost everything in last year’s floods are given a chance to rebuild their houses, regain their livelihoods and put their children back in school.

One of the ERF-funded initiatives is a cash-for-work project implemented in Malakand by the International Labor Organization (ILO).

One of the project beneficiaries, Noor Rehman, a daily wage labourer and head of a family of 13, says he has found it very hard to cope with the loss of his house and livelihood. “I am the sole breadwinner for my family. I work in fields for landowners to make ends meet, and it has been difficult to find work after we came back home. We needed money to rebuild, and for day-to-day expenses, so I was left with very little to spare for the education of my children,” he said.

In January 2011, the family returned to their home and started rebuilding after months of displacement due to the floods that destroyed their village last July. Mr. Noor is now able to rebuild his home as well as earn a living in the process. He has also been able to put his children back to school with the extra income he now earns.

Cash-for-Work projects have been started in the flood-affected areas to engage families in reconstruction works before returning to their homes and provide them with a job, according to the ILO project manager.

The Emergency Response Fund in Pakistan was set up in March 2010 as an un-earmarked pooled funding mechanism to provide rapid and flexible funding to in-country organizations to address urgent and unforeseen humanitarian needs in emergencies. During the 2010 monsoon floods, the ERF was mainly utilized by NGOs and UN agencies to respond quickly and effectively in the emergency and the early recovery phase. The total amount that has been dispersed through ERF since August 2011 is around US$36 million. There are still $600,000 in the ERF reserve.

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