

HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Since it first coordinated [humanitarian relief operations](#) in Europe following the devastation and massive displacement of people in the Second World War, the United Nations has been relied on by the international community to [respond](#) to natural and man-made disasters that are beyond the capacity of national authorities alone. Today, the UN is a major provider of emergency relief and longer-term assistance, a catalyst for action by governments and relief agencies, and an advocate on behalf of people struck by emergencies.

Emergencies

Conflicts and natural disasters continue to drive civilians from their homes. By the end of 2006, some 12.8 million people were displaced within their own countries and another 9.9 million people had become refugees by fleeing across international borders. Natural disasters, mostly weather-related, affect more than 200 million people every year. UNDP reports that 94 per cent of natural disasters are caused by cyclones, floods, earthquakes and drought, with heat waves and forest fires also taking a toll in human suffering.

Confronted with conflict and the escalating human and financial costs of natural disasters, the United Nations engages on two fronts. On one hand, it brings immediate relief to the victims, primarily through its operational agencies; on the other hand, it seeks more effective strategies to prevent emergencies from arising in the first place.

Assistance

When disaster strikes, the UN and its agencies rush to deliver humanitarian assistance. For example, in 2006, the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#) fed nearly 88 million people in 78 countries, including most of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#) provided international protection and assistance to millions of refugees and IDPs. To fund emergency operations, the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#) launched inter-agency appeals that raised \$3 billion for humanitarian aid. The [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East \(UNRWA\)](#) has been providing education, health, relief and social services to Palestine refugees since 1950.

Prevention

Through such means as the [humanitarian early warning system \(HEWS\)](#) and the [United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction \(ISDR\)](#), the UN works to prevent such occurrences and mitigate their effects. In addition, the [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#) monitors impending famines, as well as other food and agricultural concerns, while the [World Meteorological Organization \(WMO\)](#) carries out tropical cyclone forecasting and drought monitoring. The [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#) assists disaster-prone countries in developing contingency planning and other preparedness measures.