

UN Group Demands Better Rescue Efforts In Disasters

By Stefan Bos
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United Nations delegates are demanding better coordination between UN rescue teams and non governmental organizations (NGOs) during natural disasters such as the recent earthquake in Indonesia. The appeal came at a regional conference in Budapest, Hungary of the UN's International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), a global network of more than 80 countries and disaster response organizations.

A large number of natural disasters, centered in Southeast Asia the past few weeks, has helped to motivate United Nations delegates to agree to improve cooperation between U.N. rescue teams and non-governmental organizations.

Among those expressing concerns about current inefficiencies is Hungarian official Attila Tatar, the outgoing chairman for Africa, Europe and the Middle East of the UN's International Search And Rescue Advisory Group.

Tatar told VOA News that he and other delegates of the Advisory Group are concerned about what he calls "disaster tourism" where independent groups seem to compete with UN-led efforts. "I think it's a better way if we move together and everything will be synchronized. If a country for example wants special technical rescue teams and the non governmental services have not these teams but rather send water rescue teams, that's a big problem," he said.

Tatar believes coordination is urgently needed and points to the size of the recent humanitarian disasters such as the earthquake and tsunami that killed more than 1,000 people in Indonesia and the Pacific islands of Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga this week.

The United Nations has estimated that around the world last year some 236,000 people lost their lives in over 300 disasters, while another 200 million people were indirectly affected. The estimated damage totalled over \$180 billion.

Some non-governmental groups have complained about the UN's insistence on waiting for permission from national authorities before relief is offered, even in autocratic countries such as Burma, where last year a cyclone left at least 138,000 people dead or missing.

That is a major issue for the incoming chairman of the UN's International Search And Rescue Advisory Group, Mohamed A.J. Al Ansari, who is from the United Arab Emirates.

Al Ansari admitted to VOA News that autocratic governments seem reluctant to accept outside help. "So everybody has his own way to ask for help. You can not enforce somebody to do something. Maybe the way they do it you don't like it, but for them it's acceptable..." he said.

Despite controversy over the UN's role in disaster relief, African delegates at the Budapest

meeting seemed to agree that governments should increase their involvement and that of the UN in disaster relief.

Tunis-based Ramzi Dhafer, who leads the UN's Advisory Group's African efforts, said Africa has been overwhelmed by outside groups. "In Africa it's so difficult. Some countries and governmental institutions and structures don't have the capability to create themselves teams or a system to respond to a small or a big disaster. If we find an NGO in Africa, it comes from outside..." he said.

Delegates agreed that with the possibility of more natural disasters from global warming in the years ahead, there needs to be quick action on improved coordination between the giant agencies of the UN, individual governments of countries affected by natural disasters and the many non-governmental organizations around the world.