CASE STUDY 3: FLOODING

November 2006 to April 2007 was unusually wet for the country of Lapita particularly the city of Lago with its 15,000 people. On the 1st of April, torrential evening rains seemed like the usual weather pattern of the past week. However 10 hours later, it seems that the downpour would continue for the next few hours. Lago sits on a river bank which the people also use for subsistence consumption. The town hospital and schools and most governmental services are within the river banks too. Heavy rains caused weakening of soil structures and because of heavy earth moving activities such as dense housing projects and roads, massive landslides occurred in residential zones and also buried infrastructures, and roads. A few fatalities were reported with many more wounded. Three (out of 4) schools were destroyed and the hospital was flooded and partly damaged from the landslides. Most of the patients had to be evacuated to another end of the hospital causing serious overcrowding issues. The Angel Wing (women’s ward) and Adam ward (male ward) were converted into one facility for both male and female patients. Children were also placed in the general and outpatient ward, which was also used as shelter for rescued people from the disaster zones. The damages by the landslides were substantial which included destruction to power poles and communication lines. The city’s under-financed and improperly managed drainage system saw the city becoming submerged in water within minutes. To add to the disaster, the river bank also burst into the city causing widespread damages to surviving homes and government offices which was not affected by the landslides. Because of the rapid flooding, a lot of food and water supplies had been damaged by the flood. As a results, looters looted the damaged foodstuff and many children were seen eating a lot of the soiled products from the shops.

At the time of this incurring national disaster, the government of Lapita had just gone through a general election where a new government came into power. The government response was therefore slow as they had to make official appointments of respective head of government departments. The Red Cross was quick to set up a temporary shelter in the traditional land of the Moko people who had just the week prior to the flooding threatened to close down all government stations on their land for failure of government to pay rent and royalties accumulated over the years. The issue had caused intensive national outcry over the past weeks. The Moko people demanded that rations supplied should be more for them for reasons relating to unpaid government dues and the use of their land for temporary shelter. The Red Cross was threatened with looting and destruction of property if they did not respond to the Moko people’s demand. The Moko and Lago people had a colorful history of tribal wars in the late 1800’s and prior to the country’s independence in 1980 and there were often strong competitions when it came to sports and other community based activities to date. Moko village was about 20 kilometers away from
Lago and the relocation of their once arch competitors to their land was received with mixed reactions.

All transportation routes to Lapita were destroyed and the roads which had been buried by the landslides were blocked off. Road clearing was difficult as some survivors were amongst the rumbles. Severe hyperthermia had settled in for women and children who were displaced by the disasters. Those buried under the slides were mostly the older people. At the time of the disaster response the rain continued to fall in Lago.

Response:

The Lapita Disaster Committee was completely unprepared for the emergency response as the Government reshuffle in the past week had seen a lot of the former members of the Committee relocated to other Ministries. The country’s Director of Meteorology was on a study leave overseas and the acting Director had been admitted to hospital few days before the flood. Consequently the flood warning was not broadcasted in time for the Lago people to begin evacuation. However Red Cross had managed to liaise with International Agencies on the relief assistance. Donations started to pour in through to the National Red Cross Center. Red Cross had to charter small boats from the Government shipyard and these were the means of transporting basic humanitarian aid. Lapita’s defense forces were quick to send its officers on humanitarian assistance. However their presence was also to contain a possible conflict between the Moko people and the humanitarian agencies on the ground. The defense also had to do a traditional request to the chief of Moko to plead for her assistance in this recovery process. Medical shortages in Lapita facilitated the Government of Kopiko’s sending in a team of medical experts. The outbreak of leptosporasis and a new water related virus which scientists have dubbed a “mad fly disease” saw scientific research teams from neighboring countries of Moko and Boto coming in to do tests. This necessitated the use of gloves and masks for volunteers and those who were not properly clothed could not go near this disaster zone which had been declared a Biological and Disaster Hazard area by the Government. However because humanitarian assistance had started before this declaration of a biological disaster area, a few of the volunteers had started becoming very sick with three Red Cross workers reported dead. The casualties figures were unknown and assistance continued. Land structures continued to be weakened by the rain and in some areas small slides continued to complicate search and rescue efforts.
Based on the information above:

1. Using the checklist, identify the human rights issues from the case study.
2. What recommendations can you make to address the human rights issues identified in the response and recovery phases?
3. How can human rights be effectively used to mitigate damages and losses following a natural disaster in the case study?
4. Is there anything not in the checklist that would have been helpful in assessing this situation from a human rights perspective?
5. Discuss how using this check list has changed your approach to addressing this disaster.
6. In your area of work, how could some of the human rights issues identified be addressed?