

NATURAL DISASTERS IN AUSTRALIA AND THE

SOUTH WEST PACIFIC: 1990 - 2000

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Australia is an island continent extending from approximately 10 degrees to 45 degrees South latitude and is subject to harsh extremes of climate. Much of the land is desert or semi desert and the remainder varies from tropical rain forest to extensive winter snowfields. Australia's primary external area of disaster mitigation is Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific-with landforms ranging from coral atolls to mountainous tropical jungle. During the remainder of my address the words South West Pacific should be taken to include Papua New Guinea.

Natural disasters in this area include cyclones, severe storms, earthquakes, floods, bushfires, volcanoes droughts, desertification and locust plagues. Introduction of exotic animal diseases to which local stock has no immunity is a constant threat which is viewed very seriously.

During the 1960s a series of severe natural disasters focused attention of government on the need for adequate coordinated counter disaster measures. Since that time steady progress has been made. Initially this was achieved internally, but over the past ten years attention has been directed to external counter disaster issues in the South West Pacific.

I shall address the development of current arrangements for dealing with natural disasters within Australia and how these

arrangements have been extended to assist South West Pacific nations. I shall also discuss expected developments to the end of the decade.

Australia is governed by one Commonwealth Government and eight State Governments. Additionally there are 880 local government authorities.

Australia's counter disaster system reflects the fact that the states have constitutional responsibility for protection of the lives and property of their citizens. State Governments exercise control over most of the functions which are essential for effective disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery - through the legislative and regulatory arrangements within which the community and the various agencies operate; through the provision of police, fire, ambulance, medical, hospital and emergency services; and through the government and statutory agencies which provide services to the community. Local Government plays a major role, as do the many voluntary organisations, because of their intimate links with the communities they serve. The role of the Commonwealth is to provide guidance and support to States in developing their capacity for dealing with disaster, and to provide physical assistance to a requesting State in the event that a disaster occurs that is beyond its capability.

The national system for combatting disaster thus relies on a partnership between all levels of government and the community.

Our national system has three main elements:

. The Commonwealth/States agreement for financial relief under the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA);

. The State counter disaster organisations; and

. The Natural Disasters Organisation.

The first element is the Commonwealth/States agreement for financial relief under the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA) - established by the Commonwealth in 1978/79 - to assist States to meet the unpredictable and sometimes large costs of providing natural disaster relief and recovery. Under NDRA the Commonwealth reimburses at least 50 percent of State expenditure on eligible measures for the short-term relief of personal hardship and distress - it also provides financial assistance for other eligible longer-term relief and restoration measures.

. The second element is the State counter disaster organisations. They are generally built around State counter disaster committees or councils. Their functions differ in detail, but they are mainly responsible to ensure that proper plans and arrangements for dealing with disasters are in place.

Members come from the various emergency services, State authorities, and volunteer organisations likely to be needed. Below State level, that is at regional and local levels, there are similar committees, which are usually chaired by senior police officers.

At the operational end of the system there are emergency operations centres at each level to co-ordinate the activities of the many participating organisations including the police, fire and ambulance services, State Emergency Services, plus numerous supporting organisations.

The Australian concept is simple. In the first instance, the problem of dealing with an emergency or disaster is the responsibility of the individuals who are directly involved. When it becomes apparent that they cannot reasonably cope they seek help - normally from the appropriate next superior authority. Thus, responsibility for response, containment and restoration starts at the lowest level of government - and passes up through the region or district to State level as capabilities or capacities are exceeded.

This disaster management philosophy has developed from the fact that the closest relationship between people and government is at the level of local government. It relies on the fact that early application of locally available resources will provide the most effective response, in the form of first aid or life-saving remedial measures.

It also acknowledges the fact that if help from a nearby municipality or from the State is called for there will be a delay before it arrives. This really means that self-help, especially at local government level, is central to the Australian philosophy for the development of an effective capability. Indeed, experience has shown that the development of such a capability depends primarily upon having a prepared community - that is a community which:

. Is alert, informed and active;

. Has an active and involved local government; and

. Has agreed, co-ordinated and proven arrangements for disaster response.

The third element of the national system is the Natural Disasters Organisation.

Its function is:

"To promote and support an effective national counter disaster and core civil defence capability. To co-ordinate Commonwealth Government physical assistance within Australia in time of disaster and act as the operational agent for the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau within the South West Pacific and Papua New Guinea.

Organisation: The organisation of NDO to meet that function is in two parts: A headquarters responsible for operations, policy and support, and the Australian Counter Disaster College responsible for training. Total staff is 65.

Let me at this stage emphasise that Australian Counter Disaster arrangements apply equally to natural and man made disasters. We apply the same set of management arrangements to all types of disasters and to civil defence. This is generally known as the All Hazards Approach. We also believe it is essential to address four basic elements of disaster management. These are Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery. We call this The Comprehensive Approach. These and other basic considerations are amplified in a publication 'Commonwealth Counter Disaster Concepts and Principles' which together with its companion document 'Australian Counter Disaster Arrangements' is available for inspection in the display area. Copies can be supplied, on request, free of charge. Study of these publications will provide an understanding of Australian counter disaster arrangements which are simple, effective, and have withstood the test of time. Arrangements rely heavily on volunteer effort, and the extent of this effort may be more appreciated from the fact that our population base of about 17 million provides 250,000 volunteer fire fighters and 60,000 volunteer members of State Emergency Services.

Because Australia has been combatting disasters for many years a number of existing and scheduled programs already conform to IDNDR goals. Greenhouse initiatives such as afforestation programs, upgraded flood warning services, South Pacific tidal monitoring stations and upgraded severe storm warning systems are indicative of programs already in hand.

I would now like to speak about Australian international IDNDR contributions.

Although we are geographically large Australia has only modest financial and population resources. Consequently we must be selective in our international contributions and these are mainly channelled into the South West Pacific area. Nevertheless, we are, as an Australian IDNDR contribution, producing a series of emergency operations and training manuals.

Experts from each Australian emergency and response agency, funded by the Natural Disasters Organisation, are jointly preparing manuals which have wide application. Already two manuals have been published - these are, 'Disaster Rescue', and 'Land Search Operations'. Copies have been sent by request to a number of overseas countries. Manuals under development include, 'Flood Rescue Boat Operations', 'Storm Damage Operations', 'Four Wheel Drive Vehicle Operations', 'Communications', 'Training and Instructional Techniques', 'Chain Saw Operations' and 'Road Accident Rescue'. These manuals may be reproduced free of copyright fees, subject to suitable acknowledgement. For developing countries we will provide copies in English, free of charge. Copies of the two printed manuals are available for inspection in the display area. Other public awareness material covering cyclones, earthquakes and floods is also available for inspection.

Let me turn now to the South West Pacific region. As a result of disaster response experiences gained over a number of years in this region it became obvious that Australia needed to provide more than response assistance to nations in this area.

It has been decided that a major Australian contribution to the IDNDR will be the Pacific Disaster Preparedness Program. This programme, which is funded by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau offers participating nations assistance with the development of their national disaster preparedness. It is anticipated that most assistance will be provided in the form of national packages designed to meet the particular needs of each country. These packages can be funded for up to three years initially, but extensions may be negotiated. The programme also has the flexibility to provide assistance with smaller projects.

Elements available for inclusion in packages are: Hazard and Vulnerability Analysis; National Policy Advice; Counter Disaster Planning; Operation of Emergency Operations Centres; Preparation of Operating Procedures; Training; Exercise Writing and Organisation; Damage Assessment; Public Awareness and Education; and finally Equipment. Some of these elements have already been initiated with some countries - training is a notable example.

Let me however sound a note of caution in respect to the South West Pacific region. Constrained population and financial resources preclude these nations from following the high technology path. Solutions need to be simple. Systems must be capable of operation without costly repair and maintenance. We must ensure that any assistance provided does not create an unsustainable demand for future maintenance in terms of finance and time.

Having made this point let me now conclude by returning to the Australian scene.

As a result of continuous application Australian counter disaster capabilities have developed to a stage where we consider they are, by world standards, sound. That is not to say they are perfect and indeed we are continuously seeking improvements.

Nevertheless, we believe that our major contribution under the IDNDR will be towards improving the lot of neighbouring nations in the South West Pacific and we will be steadily working towards that goal.

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