

# Offering the wrong aid in a disaster

It is vital to manage such situations properly, including unsolicited and non-priority donations.

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GARY Domingo from the Philippines Foreign Ministry has a cheeky but effective response to those wanting to give unsolicited and non-priority aid during a disaster amid all the chaos.

"Love is nice but we prefer cash," he tells concerned groups who want to go down to the ground and offer love, care, healing or other unnecessary forms of aid.

Philippines has had its share of natural disasters such as the deadly Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013, which snatched 6,300 lives, and the more recent Typhoon Hagupit, which left 25 dead along with a trail of massive devastation and destruction.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster when the situation is still chaotic on the ground, one of the problems is when well-meaning persons come forward offering help that people do not need during that emergency phase.

So what do you do? And how do you politely turn them away?

Lucia Cipullo, a Disaster Law delegate from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) South-East Asia, says after the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2011, Rayban wanted to do its bit by sending over boxes of sunglasses.

"While that is a nice idea in principle, it is not one of the top priorities. People do send over unnecessary things during a disaster," she told a regional conference on Strengthening International Humanitarian Law organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

But there are some other things sent in during disasters which might not be as harmless as a pair of sunglasses.

Cipullo says there have been instances where expired medication was "donated" to disaster areas or places where the labels were in a foreign language which the country receiving it did not understand.

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Gabby Emery

"There are no laws in place governing this (aid during disasters), so countries can sometimes receive goods that are detrimental (like expired medication)," she adds.

Disaster Coordinator for IFRC for the Asia Pacific Zone Gabby Emery says the situation on the ground during a disaster is often overwhelming and there is a need to educate donors not to give things which are not needed or non-priority.

"It is hard for countries (hit by disaster) to say 'no' when others want to help," she says.

She adds, however, that the governments of these countries should assume control over the type of goods coming in.

"They should not take in unsolicited goods and things which people don't need," she says.

In an interview after the regional conference, Martin Faller, the head of operations IFRC (Asia Pacific Zone), says with regards to Malaysia's handling of the massive floods in December, there are lessons to be learnt and improvements to be made where there are weaknesses and shortcomings.

"Malaysia did not expect such a heavy disaster and was not well-prepared. There have been big floods here before but none as heavy or big as this one," he says.

"This is something we see in other countries too. It was exactly the same in Vanuatu with the recent cyclone (Cyclone Pam killed 11 people and left 75,000 others homeless). It was also the same with Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

"We see many countries

# Better preparations will aid disaster response

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where the disasters are beyond the dimensions which have been anticipated.”

For Faller, what this means is that the national authorities would have to quickly review their disaster preparedness, response structure, measures and coordination system, and also look at how they can work together with local organisations such as the Red Crescent, NGOs and international groups.

He thinks it is good that the Malaysian government wants to go to this process now and is looking at the current system to see how it can be improved.

“Many people realise now that Malaysia has not been well prepared. We have seen a lot of shortcomings in some areas. The support for the population came very late and the flooding continued because there was a lot of stagnant water. The biggest problem was sanitation.

“All this can be prevented with better coordination, stronger national organisations and better disaster laws.”

He points out that one of the key components in better organising the country's disaster response is “how to bring the right people together at the right time”.

Faller says to have the best preparedness, this has to happen at the community level.

“It is important that the disaster risk reduction mechanism and standard operating procedure (SOP) go deep into the communities that could be affected by disasters so that they organise themselves better.

“They should get better early warnings



All that's left: A woman sitting by the ruins of her house, which was destroyed by floodwaters, in Manek Urai, Kelantan. — EPA

so that they can take early action and get better support from a selected group of players who have the particular expertise. They should all be sitting around one table with the government in planning the preparedness and organising the response when such a disaster strikes.”

Faller says when a disaster strikes, many of the people who are there to respond to are affected themselves.

“That is typical and has happened to so many countries,” he adds.

He points out that one of the problems is when access roads are blocked because people want to come and help the victims.

“So you not only have organisations coming in, but also individuals who just take their cars and drive there because they want to do something.

“It is very positive that people want to do this but the downside is that they are blocking all the roads.

“This means that the professionals who need to get in from outside to bring in fuel, pumps to pump out the water and relief only manage to get in slowly because the roads are blocked by these other people,” he says.

Faller stresses that this is something that only the government can regulate and organise.

“The most important thing in a disaster is that you manage it. The government has to manage those who need to get in such as the fire brigade, the police, the Red Crescent and other organisations so that they have free access.

“They should also manage the others who want to do something good so that these people have controlled access (instead of free access and blocking roads). It would be wrong to tell individuals who want to help not to do it.”

He also says it is crucial to regulate traffic into the disaster area, otherwise everything

breaks down.

“I've seen this happen in other places where for the first two or three days, nothing is happening because the streets are blocked with people wanting to do things but who are getting in the way.”

Faller says there should also be a mechanism in place to receive donations from the people and distribute them later in an organised manner.

“Organise the mechanism in such a way that you can accommodate solidarity in the population or in cases of extreme disasters, international solidarity.

“It is not about telling everybody, ‘We don't need your help’. It is about channeling it in a way where people can express their solidarity with the affected country and people in a coordinated and orderly manner to avoid unsolicited goods or useless things like high-heeled shoes (as donations) and things the people don't need,” Faller adds.

He says during disasters, unsolicited goods might take up valuable space in a warehouse or block a harbour from bringing in priority supplies and even block roads.

“The government shouldn't think it has to do everything itself.

“If it has good organisations in the country that can do certain things, then let them do it. Empower them, support them, develop them and let them do it.

“The government has to create the space in which these organisations can work and the space where individuals can also express their solidarity.”



Deep waters: A partially submerged settlement in the Pengkalan Chepa district of Kelantan. — EPA



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