

Happy birthday, ECHO

The Iraq and Afghanistan crises have had a profound effect on humanitarian crisis management. As ECHO celebrates its first decade, **François Grünewald** highlights its achievements and identifies some of the problems that lie ahead



Photo: ECHO/Y.HORENT

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SET UP DURING THE BITTER CONFLICT in former Yugoslavia, the EU Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) has in its 10-year life faced some dramatic challenges. Soon after its birth, ECHO had to deal with the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide and its impact on the former Zaire. After the bloody repercussions of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, ECHO had to respond to natural disasters that included droughts, floods, devastating hurricanes and earthquakes.

One of the things that stands out most clearly from the past decade is ECHO's strong relationship with European civil society, as represented by NGOs. However, this relationship has not always been easy, as it involves intensive interaction between fund providers and humanitarian organisations. In some cases, for instance, problems have arisen because the financial power of donors can unbalance the relationship with humanitarian players and thereby increase the risk of their being used for political purposes.

The lengthy negotiations over the first and second framework partnership contracts revealed how difficult it is to reconcile the two sides. While ECHO focused on quality and accountability, the NGOs were intent on holding on to their right to take the initiative and to their independence. The abolition of fixed sums and other changes in financing methods also left a few players struggling with their structural costs. However, although negotiations are far from over, it seems safe to hope that common sense and responsibility will prevail.

Marked improvement

A great deal was accomplished in the past decade, especially in areas such as the linkage between emergency and development, the approach to intervention in long-lasting conflicts, dealing with forgotten conflicts and preventing catastrophes, but much work remains to be done. While it is not up to ECHO alone to determine European intervention in these areas, there has been a marked improvement since 1998 when ECHO and the Directorate General for Development were placed under the supervision of the same Commissioner. However, there are still some areas of concern. The questions raised over

ECHO's decision to withdraw from Haiti, Bosnia and Serbia, for instance, have shown how difficult it is to put the linkage between emergency, rehabilitation and development into operation.

ECHO has also shown support for NGO efforts to improve the security conditions in which volunteers work and to facilitate evaluation work. For example, ad-hoc budget lines have been introduced gradually into financing procedures.

European ideals

The humanitarian action carried out by European NGOs, in many cases with the support of ECHO, undoubtedly represents the best European ideals: solidarity, generosity, commitment, respect for humanitarian principles, but also professionalism in action and good governance in management. And yet there are clouds on the horizon. During the annual conference between ECHO and its partners in October 2002 in Brussels, for instance, European Commissioner Poul Nielson and ECHO Director Mrs Costanza Adinolfi both made strong appeals to remember the dangers that European humanitarianism faces in its current form.

For example, the current approach could be undermined as a result of several factors including the growing influence of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the increasing role of the military in crisis management and the trend towards private sector involvement in emergencies. The militarisation of humanitarian aid, carried to a new extreme by the United States in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and its integration into civil service through Civil Defence and Security units also poses a real threat to humanitarian action by civil society where the primary focus is on respect for principles.

But ECHO's work is also subject to internal threats. So far it has managed to preserve unique procedures within the Commission, allowing it to respond quickly to emergencies and turbulent situations. But this freedom could be lost if moves towards closer financial control prevail. It is time to draw the attention of European governments to these issues, through both civil society and elected officials, notably through the European Parliament. ■