

Australian Red Cross – making a difference

Rod McKinnon *ESM*, *Chair Australian Red Cross National Disaster Services Advisory Committee*
looks at the roles of the Australian Red Cross

On the evening of Saturday 1 October 2005, terrorist bombs killed 23 people and injured many more on the Indonesian resort island of Bali. Shortly after, the Northern Territory Division of the Australian Red Cross was placed on standby to provide assistance to victims being evacuated to Darwin. From 4am on Sunday morning, a small team of disaster services volunteers were at Darwin Airport and Royal Darwin Hospital registering and providing comfort to victims.

Introduction

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the largest volunteer-based organisation in the world. It responds to emergencies around the globe with 181 National Societies and almost 100 million volunteers. It was a key response organisation in recent major events including September 11, the Madrid and London bombings, the Bam earthquake, the Asian quake and tsunamis, *Hurricane Katrina* and, more recently, earthquakes across Pakistan, India and Afghanistan.

The Australian Red Cross (ARC) is a key player in the Australian emergency management environment. Through its disaster and emergency services program, the ARC is well prepared to assist Australian citizens affected by all types of disasters and emergencies.

History

On 24 June 1859, Henry Dunant, a Swiss banker travelling on business in northern Italy, came across the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino, a horrifying and

bloody conflict between 300,000 soldiers from Imperial Austria and the Franco-Sardinian Alliance. He was appalled by the sight of the sick and wounded and set about helping them, regardless of their nationality. He called upon the local population to join with him with the rally cry, 'Tutti fratelli' meaning, 'all men are brothers'. And so, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was founded. The ARC was formed as a branch of the British Red Cross on 13 August 1914, nine days after the outbreak of World War I.

Over time, the organisation's initial focus on helping the victims of conflict has broadened considerably. Today, the movement comprises people who take action to prevent and address the suffering of the most vulnerable in the community regardless of the cause.

There are four other notable attributes which distinguish the Red Cross from other humanitarian organisations.

1. It is a truly international organisation that includes national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies from 181 of the 193 sovereign states in the world.
2. All components are bound by seven fundamental principles of Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality.
3. Components of the Red Cross all have defined roles that have been set out in international law and in separate resolutions of governments at international fora.
4. While independent of their own government, National Societies are established under national law and are recognised as an auxiliary to government in times of war and natural disaster.

The Australian Red Cross

The ARC is an active and well respected player in the broader international Red Cross and Red Cross Movement, providing financial, human resource and other support to international programs. It is also a key contributor to domestic welfare matters. The ARC's vision is "to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity". Further, it seeks to be Australia's most effective community-based, humanitarian movement known for its compassion, action, and the impact of its work with vulnerable people. The ARC is well positioned



The Red Cross emblem, comprising a red cross on a white background, is perhaps the most recognisable symbol of any humanitarian organisation world wide.

to achieve this with 1 000 branches, 35 000 members and 27 000 volunteers in communities across Australia.

The ARC meets its aims and objectives through the delivery of a number of national programs co-ordinated through the National Office and delivered by a Division in each State and Territory. These programs are administered under separate arrangements and include:

- First Aid, Health and Safety;
- International Humanitarian Law;
- International Operations;
- Tracing, Refugees and Asylum Seekers;
- Youth and Education Services;
- Disaster and Emergency Services; and
- ARC Blood Service.

In addition ARC Divisions deliver a range of local community services.

The focus of this article is the ARC Disaster and Emergency Services which have historically involved registration and inquiry, emergency catering, first aid, and assistance to families following single incidents such as house fires. A number of changes are pending as the organisation is reviewing how it might better serve communities when disasters and emergencies threaten.

Table 1. Delivery of disaster and emergency services in 2005

Event	Support Provided
Fires – Eyre Peninsula South Australia January 2005	On 11 January, fire threatened to cause major disruption on the Eyre Peninsula. The State Inquiry Centre was quickly opened to activate the National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS) and volunteers were called to provide reception and registration duties at the Evacuation Centre at the Port Lincoln High School. Two Recovery Centres were established in the area and ARC volunteers staffed these centres for nine hours a day for 35 days. 992 people affected by the fires were registered. The total volunteer and staff commitment was 1467 hours – a significant effort for a rural community.
Fires – Wilsons Promontory Victoria April 2005	On 1 April, a fire reignited on Wilsons Promontory. The weather conditions were hot with strong northerly winds. A number of campers were evacuated by car, air rescue or by sea. ARC catering teams, registration teams and Red Cross Communications (RECOM) were activated and were sent to various locations in the area. The event lasted several hours and necessitated activation of the State Inquiry Centre (SIC). Staff and volunteers were sent to the Tidal River area and staff activated the SIC. Over a period of several hours, 600 registrations were taken and transmitted to the SIC via fax or RECOM. Catering teams provided 320 meals to the emergency services and refreshments for those members of the public who were not immediately evacuated. As evacuees were able to use mobile phones to contact relatives, the SIC only received a small number of inquiries.
Flooding – Lismore area, New South Wales June 2005	Severe flooding resulting from very heavy rain on 30 June which fell over the north and east of NSW for more than 24 hours necessitated the evacuation of a number of homes in the Lismore and Tweed River areas. The NSW Department of Community Services sought assistance from ARC with the provision of personal support and registration at evacuation centres in Lismore and Kingscliff and subsequent outreach via door knock in the affected areas. 156 people were registered during the evacuation. 22 volunteers contributed over 150 hours to the operation.
Flooding – Gold Coast, Queensland June 2005	Unseasonal rain on the Gold Coast on 30 June caused flooding and landslips in various locations. More than 30 ARC Volunteers and Staff responded to a call from the Gold Coast City Council under the <i>Disaster Management Plan</i> to provide personal support and registration in a community centre in Southport and an evacuation centre in Burleigh Heads. 74 people were registered during the evacuation. ARC was subsequently asked by the Queensland Department of Communities to continue to provide assistance to residents for a further two weeks during the recovery phase. This entailed the provision of tea/coffee and lunch while they were clearing the debris and cleaning up the site.
Bombing Bali – Indonesia October 2005	Following the Bali bombings on 1 October, the NT Division was placed on alert early in the morning. A small ARC team met the first Qantas flight around 4am the next morning in case there was a need for personal support. Also in the early hours of the morning, 22 injured people were flown to Darwin in RAAF aircraft and a civilian charter plane. An ARC NRIS team registered the details of these victims at Royal Darwin Hospital with the information being provided to the respective authorities. The process ran smoothly and there was close interaction between agencies. Some personal support activities were also undertaken. At the national level, ARC participated as a member of the Australian Government Recovery Interdepartmental Committee providing ongoing liaison with Australian Government agencies about the needs of affected Australians. At the international level, ARC was in close liaison with the International Federation of Red Cross and the Indonesian Red Cross to determine any support needs.

ARC Disaster and Emergency Services

Under *The Australian Constitution*, State and Territory governments are responsible for the protection of life and property within their jurisdictions. ARC Divisions maintain close links with their respective emergency management authorities and have clearly defined roles in State and Territory emergency management plans. Roles vary between ARC Divisions with the registration of disaster victims and responding to subsequent telephone inquiries using the National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS) being the common task conducted in all jurisdictions.

Some examples of the work undertaken by ARC Divisions in the States and Territories in delivering disaster services in Australia in 2005 are summarised in Table 1. While these tasks may not seem significant in comparison with other recent international disasters, they are typical of the type and scale of event faced every year. Notwithstanding, the response effort represents a significant contribution by ARC volunteers.

ARC also provided a significant national recovery response following the 2002 Bali bombings, working in partnership with all Australian governments to ensure people affected were provided with comprehensive assistance programs.

At the national level, the Australian Government, through Emergency Management Australia (EMA), assists in the development of disaster management arrangements across States and Territories and co-ordinates assistance to States and Territories, when requested, following a disaster or emergency.

ARC Disaster Services mirror these arrangements. National Office has responsibility for national functions such as the development of policy and procedures, resource allocation and delivery, liaison with Australian

Government agencies including EMA, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Family and Community Services and Centrelink. It also represents the ARC on key national bodies such as the Australian Emergency Management Volunteers Forum, the Emergency Services Information Assurance Advisory Group and other committees formed to manage the domestic recovery aspects of events such as the Bali bombings.

To ensure a coherent approach to the delivery of disaster services nationally, the ARC has established two committees. These are the Disaster and Emergency Services Managers Forum (DESMF) and the National Disaster Services Advisory Committee (NDSAC). The DESMF is chaired by the General Manager Domestic Operations and comprises disaster managers from each Division. Its role is to provide inter-divisional liaison, co-ordination and co-operation at the operational level of disaster and emergency services. The NDSAC is chaired by a vice-president from the ARC Council and comprises senior representatives from National Office and Divisions and independent emergency management advisers. Its role is to provide advice to the ARC Board on disaster and emergency services and to examine and recommend new directions in disaster and emergency services. The DESMF informs the NDSAC on operational aspects related to the delivery of disaster and emergency services.

Moving forward

During 2005, the NDSAC reviewed the traditional disaster and emergency services provided by the ARC and developed a framework of actions needed in order for the ARC to maintain its prominence as a recognised leader in the provision of disaster and emergency services. This was a timely review as the NDSAC recommendations have now been incorporated in the new ARC Strategic plan, *Strategy 2010*.

Some of the key disaster and emergency services strategies are outlined below.

Registration and inquiry

With the increasing proliferation of mobile phone technology, there has been some suggestion that the future of the registration and inquiry services are limited as most people affected by disasters have a ready means at hand to inform family and friends of their location and status. However, recent experience from disasters such as *Hurricane Katrina* has shown that mobile and fixed communications are not always readily available following disasters due to damage to infrastructure or network congestion. Further, there still remains a need for disaster victims to be registered by government agencies for the purposes of subsequent medical or welfare needs. This is a role readily undertaken by ARC volunteers to free up government officials to undertake more pressing tasks. The ARC considers that the importance of the registration of disaster victims is unlikely to diminish in the near future and it will continue to afford a high priority this service.

The National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS) database is currently being migrated from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing to the ARC Information Technology Network. This will provide a permanent home for the NRIS database. EMA will continue to manage the development of NRIS and State and



ARC volunteers entering data into the NRIS data base during a recent exercise.

Territory authorities will continue to determine when NRIS is activated.

To enhance ARC's NRIS roles, a component of funding recently obtained under the National Emergency Volunteer Support Fund will be used to develop and implement NRIS training and to recruit a diverse mix of disaster and emergency services volunteers. These funds will also be used to purchase equipment to enhance the ARC's capacity to transmit registration data from remote locations to inquiry centres in capital cities when conventional means are unavailable.

Interpersonal skills

Often following a disaster, ARC volunteers are the first people in contact with traumatised disaster victims. This puts considerable strain on volunteers who may have been deployed to do registrations and who may not be trained to deal with the special needs of disaster victims. To alleviate this situation, the development of interpersonal skills training – supporting people in a crisis – is to become a core program offered to NRIS operators. In some areas of Australia the ARC already undertakes a formal personal support role – provision of comfort, care and referral to the relevant government professional services – however there is some variation in the approach undertaken. As part of the recruitment and training program, a national interpersonal skills training curriculum will be developed and all NRIS operators will be equipped with the necessary skills to ensure they are able to provide comfort to disaster victims in a professional way and without risk to their own well being.

Responding to new threats

Traditionally, the ARC has responded to natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, and fires where there was little likelihood of volunteers becoming victims.



An ARC volunteer comforts a victim of the 2002 Canberra bushfires.

However, the changing threat scenario involving bombings, the use of chemical, biological and radiological weapons and the potential for health related pandemics requires new thinking. In such cases, the needs of victims may differ from past events particularly if they have been exposed to some form of contamination or infection. There is also potential for volunteers to become victims themselves even though they will not normally be allowed in high risk areas. As well as working with Australian disaster management authorities in developing plans for meeting the needs of those exposed to such environments, the ARC will draw on the experiences of other National Societies such as the American, British, Spanish and Indonesian Red Cross which have all had to deal with bombings in recent times. Being part of an international movement affords the ARC a unique opportunity to contribute to the emergency management sector in Australia.

Other opportunities

In the past, the ARC's role has been predominantly focused on the provision of assistance during the response and recovery phase of a disaster. While there is a

need to revisit the cost benefit of providing these services, there may be other areas in which the ARC can make an effective contribution. Opportunities for broadening the ARC disaster and emergency services role are to be scoped. This may lead to seeking greater involvement in areas such as disaster preparedness which have traditionally been the domain of other non-government or government agencies. There may be places, such as in regional or rural areas, where by virtue of its presence, the ARC is better placed to foster disaster preparedness related activities. ARC again can draw on the extensive international experience of the Movement to inform and enhance Australia's preparedness for disasters.

Partnerships

Another option for delivering disaster and emergency services may be in partnership with others. Such arrangements have the potential for greater sharing of expertise and more effective use of resources. The ARC Victorian Division is paving the way in this area, providing support to St John Ambulance in the provision of emergency first aid at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

NDSAC is reviewing the expertise and resources the ARC could provide in any strategic partnership related to disaster and emergency services. On a broader front, the ARC is exploring strategic partnerships at the local, national, regional and global levels after working with a number of other partners in the response to the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2004 Asian quakes and tsunamis.

Disaster appeals

ARC has demonstrated its capacity to deliver effective and efficient emergency appeals, including the 2002 Bali Appeal, 2002 Farmhand Appeal, and 2005 Asian Quake and Tsunamis Appeal. When called on for assistance, the ARC also supports emergency appeals in State and Territory jurisdictions.

This experience places the organisation in an excellent position to manage future disaster appeals of any size. Whenever necessary, the ARC will offer this expertise, and that of its counterparts around the world, to the emergency services sector in Australia.

National recovery arrangements

The ARC's national capacity is far greater than the sum of its parts. This was evident when, following the Bali bombings in 2002, the organisation provided extensive recovery support through the ARC Bali Appeal and established a network of caseworkers across Australia. This was a first for the ARC and at a scale and type of emergency not previously seen in Australia.

This experience, supported by that of other National Societies which have responded to similar events around the world, places the Australian Red Cross in a sound position to play a significant role in recovery arrangements for any future national emergencies.

ARC has been openly contributing this knowledge and experience in assisting Australian governments in their response to other recent international events such as the Asian quake and tsunamis and, more recently, the 2005 Bali bombings. ARC continues to seek opportunities to use its expertise to assist government agencies in their role of assisting Australians to recover from disasters.

Conclusion

The Red Cross is a major player in dealing with disasters and emergencies throughout the world. Within Australia, the Australian Red Cross works closely with the civil authorities in delivering a range of disaster and emergency services to citizens affected by disasters. The majority of these services are delivered by a dedicated band of volunteers located in communities throughout the nation.

While the ARC has been delivering these services for many years, it cannot afford to rest on its laurels. There is a need to review the cost effectiveness of the current services and to explore opportunities for an enhanced and more diverse role. Only in this way can the Australian Red Cross continue to make a difference.

Author

Rod McKinnon is an Australian Red Cross volunteer. He was the Director of Planning and Operations at Emergency Management Australia from 1996 to 2003. Following retirement, he was invited to join the Australian Red Cross' National Disaster Services Advisory Committee as a disaster management adviser. In November 2004, he was elected to the Australian Red Cross Society Council as a Vice President and appointed Chairman of the Committee.