

FOREWORD

Improving our regional responses to relief and recovery
By Roger Jones, former Director EMAI

In its response to urgent calls for cash-or-kind relief and recovery assistance to countries affected by natural disasters, the Australian Government has always been recognised as generous. So too have Australians, whether their response has been made as committed volunteers or through formally-organised and audited appeals.

However, there is no doubt that government and individual responses to disasters happening overseas can be more prompt, better targeted and more effectively coordinated. This is particularly the case for Australian responses to disasters occurring in our region of interest that are consistently faced with difficulties in areas such as communication, information exchange and cultural differences.

We may be taking a positive step in improving our regional response effectiveness with the proposal made in the Australian Government's 2006 White Paper *Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability* that the Government create a National Emergency Protocol to coordinate Australia's response to domestic and regional events.

Inevitably, most media coverage of our response to disasters in our region – fleeting though this might be – focuses on post-disaster events. Less media coverage, because it is generally less visible and not considered particularly newsworthy, is given to the tremendous contribution that Australia makes to the more humdrum task of helping to reduce the possibility of such disasters. It is time that we gave that contribution more recognition.

At the level of the national government, much of this contribution is made through the AusAID-administered Official Development Assistance (ODA) program, which will total almost \$3 billion in 2006-2007 alone.

Much of this aid is directed towards the reduction of the vulnerability of many countries, particularly those in our region, to natural and man-made disasters: by fostering better governance; by the development of needed infrastructure; by targeting particular hazards such as pandemics and other communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS; and by assisting in the development of programs to address developing threats such as those associated with climate change.

In the longer term, as forecast in the 10-year program set out in the 2006 AusAID White Paper, we can hope to see Australia adopt a more comprehensive and integrated approach to assisting in disaster risk reduction in our region, with the proposal to apply Australian science, engineering and innovation to prepare for and mitigate disasters. The paper proposes technical assistance could play an important role in such areas as strengthening national health systems; tackling major diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and pandemics; and preparing for and responding to outbreaks of emerging infectious diseases.

To enhance civilian emergency response capacity, the White Paper's proposals include:

- building up additional stores of relief and humanitarian items in Australia, the Pacific and South-East Asia;
- developing stand-by operations agreements with commercial entities, relevant international agencies and selected professional non-government organisations;
- building human and resource capacity for rapid humanitarian deployment assessment, response coordination, and specific sector teams, and
- refining and exercising interoperability protocols and procedures in humanitarian action.

The White Paper notes that such enhancements are an important priority and some activities are to be implemented immediately. As one who has spent much of the last decade in disaster risk reduction and disaster management activities in the Pacific, I look forward to the implementation of these proposals, given their potential to reduce our region's vulnerability to disasters and to help individual nations to cope more effectively with their impacts.