

Natural born killers



The house of Nguyen Dinh Son and his wife and their three children was destroyed by Typhoon Ketsana but they had been evacuated to a community shelter beforehand.

Last month brought a string of natural disasters to parts of Asia and the Pacific: tropical storms, heavy rains and floods in the Philippines, a typhoon in central Vietnam and parts of Laos and Cambodia, a tsunami in the South Pacific mainly affecting Samoa, an earthquake striking the Indonesian island of Sumatra and floods in southern India were the most damaging. The Commission reacted quickly to each of these catastrophes, providing fast-track emergency aid and mobilising rapid response experts from its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) to assess the needs in the worst-hit locations, also with a view to possible follow-up humanitarian support.



In and out of office and dealing with a series of natural disasters at once: Sasinapa Nong Asavaphanlert, Maria Olsen, Thearat Touch and David Verboom of the regional ECHO office in Bangkok.

These immediate relief activities addressed the most urgent needs. However, the Commission's humanitarian operations also focus on disaster risk reduction and disaster preparedness. This is becoming ever more important as the scale of natural disasters is increasing annually due to population growth, urbanisation, environmental degradation and climate change. Many catastrophes are impossible

to prevent but their negative impact can be reduced or averted, for example by establishing effective early warning systems and evacuation plans.



A water purification point for flooded villagers in Loc An run by the Red Cross.

David Verboom, Head of the ECHO regional office in Bangkok stressed: *"Preparing for disasters saves lives – but it also saves money: one euro spent in disaster preparedness saves up to four euros in relief efforts after a natural disaster."*

Experts point to Bangladesh, where in recent years many disaster risk reduction projects such as early warning systems and more cyclone shelters have been put into place – and where Cyclone Sidr killed around 3,400 people in 2007 while a comparable cyclone in 1991 killed more than 138,000 people.

Vietnam is another example where disaster preparedness is high on the agenda, as it is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. The Commission is the largest humanitarian donor

in Vietnam. It immediately released €2 million in emergency aid after Typhoon Ketsana struck. However, the Commission has also been supporting disaster preparedness projects since 1998 through a special programme called DIPECHO. As in other countries prone to natural disasters, DIPECHO supports community-based activities, local capacity building, small-scale mitigation actions, early warning systems, education and public awareness campaigns.



The house of 95 year old Pham Thi Chat was damaged beyond repair in the floods which followed Typhoon Ketsana in central Vietnam. She now lives with neighbours.

As an example, houses which were rehabilitated following a series of typhoons in Vietnam in 2006 received a reinforced basic structure and successfully withstood Typhoon Ketsana.

One ECHO partner in Vietnam, Development Workshop France (DWF), has been providing building guidance and assistance for many years. An architect working for DWF, explained that each beneficiary's house is surveyed. The weaknesses are then discussed and a contract is drawn up detailing the work to be done to make the building safe and to define the contribution to be made by the family and by the project.

No two buildings have the same strengthening needs, but typical actions include ensuring that all parts of the structure are solidly tied together, that the roof covering is securely held done with reinforced ribs or bars, that the building has strong doors and shutters and that walls are made more water and wind resistant.

So far, DWF has helped to construct 1,600 houses for poor families. Typhoon Ketsana demonstrated the advantages of reinforced constructions in a very drastic way, as the houses resisted the elements incurring only minor damage, whereas other buildings were destroyed or ruined beyond repair.

A challenge of a different kind is to inform beneficiaries about the sender of the humanitarian assistance. When a translator informed the Hmong people in Vietnam about this concrete expression of European solidarity, he told them that the aid came from *"the people who come from behind the sky."*