Too often, aid resembles a lottery in which a few win but most lose because the aid they receive is too little too late. We must move from lottery to predictability so all those who suffer receive aid.

Jan Egeland, United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator
What is the CERF?

Part of the solution to this problem is the new Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). The United Nations has launched this US$ 500 million fund to support rapid response and to address critical humanitarian needs in underfunded emergencies. The goal is simple: provide aid workers with sufficient funding to jump-start lifesaving relief operations by immediately deploying staff, goods and services when lives are on the line.

Imagine if your local fire department had to petition the mayor for money to turn on the water every time a fire broke out. Now imagine a similar situation in humanitarian hot spots around the globe. This is the situation we faced until early 2006. Just like the fire brigade, aid workers need timely, predictable funding so that lifesaving aid can be provided when it is most needed.

Historically, the United Nations has appealed for donations after disasters occurred. Donor response has often proven unreliable and slow, with too many humanitarian catastrophes getting too little attention too late. Only a few donors can transfer funds right away. Between 2002 and 2005, on average only 16% of funds were provided for “flash” appeals during the critical first month of a crisis. Often it took longer. So funding arrived too late to help in the earliest days. In other cases, especially in protracted crises, funding was uneven, with the result that some countries got too little funding overall or got too little funding for certain life-saving aid programmes.

Why Do We Need the CERF?

When a natural disaster strikes or a conflict erupts, speedy action is critical for saving lives—and that requires financial resources immediately. Yet every time disaster hits, the United Nations has to raise money afresh and we have no guarantee that we will get the money we need to help save lives and minimize suffering.

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The United Nations continues to issue appeals for donations in response to disasters. But if new programmes are needed or if ongoing programmes are under-funded to the point that people’s very survival is at risk the UN can use the CERF to provide critical assistance.

The Fund is composed of a grant facility of up to US$ 450 million and a US$ 50 million loan facility. Up to two thirds of the grant facility can be allocated to rapid response with the other third devoted to addressing under-funded emergencies. When we know that donor funds are in the pipeline, we use the loan portion for rapid response; otherwise, we use the grant portion.

The United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator manages the Fund on behalf of the Secretary-General and is guided by an Advisory Group of 12 independent experts. While United Nations Agencies and the International Organization for Migration...