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Foreign Experts Critique U.S. Red Cross on Katrina

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By [STEPHANIE STROM](#)

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The American Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina was poorly planned, relied too heavily on inexperienced managers and often failed to meet the needs of victims, say reports by international Red Cross officials who were dispatched to assist their American counterparts.

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The unusually harsh reports, prepared in late summer and the fall, detailed mismatches between the needs of victims and the supplies the Red Cross had arranged, the absence of a plan to guide the distribution of supplies and a lack of record-keeping, which allowed inventory to go astray.

"What is clear is that the basic needs of the beneficiaries are not being met," Mike Goodhand, head of the international logistics division of the British Red Cross, wrote on Sept. 15.

The reports, which were provided to The New York Times by a former American Red Cross official who insisted on anonymity, closely echo concerns raised by volunteers in the disaster area.

Those concerns are now the subject of a wide-ranging investigation by the American Red Cross that has already produced evidence of possible criminal misconduct by volunteer managers. The F.B.I. and the Louisiana attorney general are also conducting inquiries, seeking to determine whether relief supplies were stolen.

The Red Cross, which had 235,000 volunteers in the field after Hurricane Katrina, received roughly 60 percent of the \$3.6 billion that Americans donated for hurricane relief.

Mr. Goodhand's report described a case in which victims in Mississippi, where his team had been sent, were requesting prepared meals and the only food that Red Cross volunteers could offer was bananas. Volunteers driving out into neighborhoods were asked for water and juice, but had only bleach on hand, he wrote.

"All efforts to address the situation were rebuffed," Mr. Goodhand wrote. He said that when his team offered its expertise on distributing supplies, it was instead assigned to hand out the supplies, work that could have been done by less experienced volunteers.

On Sept. 12, two weeks after the hurricane, his team did what he described as "a nonscientific but representative and valid" assessment of what victims were saying they needed. The most requested items were juice; Gatorade; feminine hygiene, general hygiene and household cleaning products; and insect repellent. The team found none of those in the warehouse.

"The demand for these items is entirely predictable," he wrote.

Senator Charles E. Grassley, the Iowa Republican who heads the Senate Finance Committee and has been pushing for an overhaul of the American Red Cross, called Mr. Goodhand's report, which he obtained independently, "very sobering reading."

"The report and similar findings from whistle-blowers make it clear that there is a significant need for deep, substantial reform at the American Red Cross," he wrote in an e-mail message to a reporter.

Mr. Goodhand's assessment, and a similar one by Thomas Riess, a German logistics expert with the International Committee of the Red Cross, were filed in September with the authors' home agencies, the American Red Cross and, in Mr. Goodhand's case, a number of other Red Cross agencies. While they did not allege criminal wrongdoing, they warned of the potential for it.

"The insufficient control on deliveries allows, without any effort, to unlawfully appropriate" supplies, Mr. Riess wrote on Sept. 12.

Mr. Riess's report also incorporated the observations of logistics experts from Red Cross organizations in Colombia, Ethiopia, Jordan and Russia, while Mr. Goodhand's included those of officials from the Red Cross agencies in Finland, the Netherlands and Spain. Current and former Red Cross officials said the language was far more pointed than is common in such reports, which are routinely filed when foreign Red Cross organizations participate in a disaster relief effort.

Armond T. Mascelli, vice president for response operations at the American Red Cross, said the organization was already working to address the concerns raised by the foreign experts.

For the coming hurricane season, Mr. Mascelli said, the Red Cross is striving to better its positioning of supplies and to find ways to improve delivery of necessities like food and water. For the longer term, he said, the agency is seeking the expertise of its corporate supporters to transform its rather simple distribution operation into a comprehensive system of supply chain management.

"Our plan is to do what we can that is reasonable for this hurricane season," he said, "but also look at what we put in place in the future to take care of catastrophic events."

Sir Nicholas Young, the chief executive of the British Red Cross, who coincidentally was at American Red Cross headquarters in Washington yesterday, said Mr. Goodhand's report provided a snapshot of what had happened in a small part of the disaster area and was not a commentary on the American Red Cross's overall response.

"What Mike's report in fact reflects is that he was working in Biloxi with one chapter with paid staff and with volunteers who didn't necessarily have the logistics skills they needed," Sir Nicholas said.

Both reports strongly praised the Red Cross volunteers. Mr. Riess wrote that he was "impressed by the motivation of volunteers and by the deep generosity of the American people." Mr. Goodhand called the volunteer corps "one of the best, if not the best, any of us have experienced."

But both also criticized the American Red Cross for assigning volunteers to tasks for which, the reports said, they were unprepared. For example, Mr. Goodhand said a volunteer in charge of managing a fleet of more than 100 vehicles did not know where cars and trucks were, why they had been dispatched or who had them.

Mr. Riess warned that a lack of accountability, resulting from a weak system of tracking inventory, threatened to damage relations with victims and donors alike.

"Critics may rise," he wrote, "and attract the unwelcome interest of journalists."

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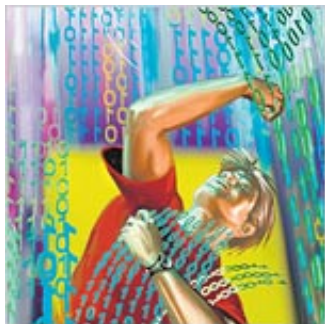
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