FACT SHEET

National Center for Environmental Health
Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services

Epidemiologic Assistance in Humanitarian Emergencies

What Is the Public Health Issue?

- Worldwide, 35 million people have fled their homes because of fear of persecution or war.
- Disease outbreaks and elevated death rates, sometimes as high as 20 times the usual death rate, are common after sudden displacement.
- Public health measures are critical in such situations, but they must be guided by epidemiologic data.

What Has CDC Accomplished?

Since the civil war in Biafra in the late 1960s, CDC has applied epidemiologic methods to humanitarian emergency relief worldwide. CDC activities during acute emergencies include the following:

- Coordinating the overall health and nutrition response to humanitarian emergencies;
- Implementing surveillance systems to track the rates of illness and death;
- Carrying out rapid health and nutrition assessments to guide emergency interventions;
- Conducting surveys to measure health and nutritional status;
- Investigating epidemics of communicable and nutritional diseases; and
- Training health care workers in the proper diagnosis and treatment of diseases.

In response to the recent complex emergency in Darfur, Sudan, CDC deployed a team of seven public health specialists to work with the World Health Organization and the World Food Program. The team helped to assess the environmental health needs of refugees and affected populations and conduct a Darfur-wide nutrition survey. The results of this work will fine-tune the environmental health programs and better target food aid for these vulnerable populations.

What Are the Next Steps?

CDC will continue to evaluate emergency programs and to improve the quality of emergency interventions. CDC will apply epidemiologic methods to assess public health problems and improve interventions in areas that are increasingly recognized as important (e.g., mental health, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, war-related injuries, reproductive health, and micronutrient nutrition).

For further information about this or other CDC programs, visit http://www.cdc.gov/programs.

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