

September 26, 2000

Dear Secretary-General Annan,

The United States is committed to improving multilateral responsiveness to complex emergencies, a goal explicitly endorsed by the U.S. International Affairs Strategic Plan, through improved early warning and information sharing with international organizations. Toward that goal, the Department of State through the US Mission has been working with the UN office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other offices in the UN Secretariat in discussing early warning indicators of mass violence and sharing data relevant to both natural and man made disasters. In addition, the Department's Office of the Geographer and Global Issues has initiated the humanitarian planning map (HPM) project, which aims to use remote sensing imagery and new information technologies to improve data sharing and planning among UN agencies, member states, and NGOs dealing with the linked challenges inherent in complex emergencies – from peacekeeping to relief delivery.

It might be useful to brief the Deputy Secretary-General on the HPM initiative, which represents a unique collaboration between the United States and the United Nations. While the need for improved information support is underscored in almost every review of UN-led crisis response – most recently in the Brahimi report on UN peace operations – the ability to share data has been stymied by technical and institutional obstacles. The HPM project will use new Internet capabilities, remote sensing imagery, and geographic information system (GIS) tools to help organize crisis data in a way that encourages information sharing among participating agencies. Almost all major UN agencies now use GIS tools to assist with their various missions. I found them of use in negotiating the Dayton accords. UN led efforts in Kosovo also provide some useful lessons about both opportunities and constraints in data sharing.

With these new information management capabilities, UN agencies involved in crisis response should be better able to avoid costly duplication of data collection, minimize delays in obtaining adequate baseline information prior to deployment, and work more effectively together during implementation. This kind of data sharing is particularly useful for coordination between peacekeepers and relief workers, as well as among deminers, refugee camp managers, food distributors, and those addressing long term economic development. The objective of GIS-based data sharing is not to dictate what each agency will monitor, but rather to encourage them to organize data already being collected in a way that makes it easier for others to access. With the proposed HPM network, a "user" sitting at the UN Secretariat, in a donor country capital, at a regional technical support hub, or, perhaps most importantly, out in a field office can query different data layers to view, for example, the relationships between IDP encampments and water availability or between food stocks and crop productivity. Such a capability should help UN staff better assess ever changing crisis conditions and thereby ensure a better informed multilateral response.

As we move forward on the HPM initiative, we will continue to work closely with your staff.

Sincerely,

Richard C. Holbrooke