

New Initiative To Strengthen Africa's Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies

By Joe De Capua , Washington

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A new initiative has been launched to strengthen the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Africa, making them better able to respond to emergencies.

The local humanitarian groups are often the first on the scene of either man-made or natural disasters. Often responding days or even weeks sooner than larger, international organizations.

Now there's a plan to establish a network of the groups across Africa. It's called NEPARC, the New Partnership for Red Cross, Red Crescent Societies. The man chosen to lead the effort is Abbas Gullet, former deputy secretary-general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Mr. Gullet has coordinated relief for such disasters as earthquakes in Iran and Turkey, and floods in Sudan, Sri Lanka and China. He's also led relief efforts for 700-thousand Rwandan and Burundian refugees.

He says, "The Red Cross, Red Crescent is the largest humanitarian organization in this continent. It's a grassroots organization. It is made of indigenous national societies, who are auxiliaries to their governments – and who are expected to intervene to assist the government when there are catastrophes or disasters in these countries."

Mr. Gullet says the first order of

business is to audit the groups in each of the African countries – to find their strengths and their weaknesses.

To do this, the San Francisco-based Fritz Institute will offer its expertise in strengthening the infrastructure of humanitarian groups. It has resources in both the business and academic communities. Also, the international organization SGS, with its experts in inspection, verification and testing, will be part of NEPARC.

Mr. Gullet says such an effort for Africa is long overdue.

"As a continent where we've had the largest intervention of humanitarian work over the last 40 years, and where the needs are most in terms of health problems, natural disasters and man-made disasters like conflict, we are saying it is appropriate and timely that the African national societies take more responsibility for their own development and capacity building of their local national societies. So that when there are these emergencies and disasters then they are able to better respond to the needs of the communities at large," he says.

He says strengthening the presence and contributions of Africa's Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies sends a strong message.

"At a time when the world is going through a lot of changes and turmoil and crises, an organization like the Red Cross and Red Crescent are

vital to support the public authorities. They are also probably highly regarded by the public in these countries. And really the message it would send would be very powerful. That there are local institutions and local organizations that can stand up and can meet international standards everywhere - and that they can respond to the needs of their own community," he says.

Abbas Gullet says the crisis in Darfur, Sudan is a good example of the work being done by such groups. In this case, the Sudanese Red Crescent Society.

He says, "The work the Sudanese Red Crescent is doing – that can already be highlighted and ongoing today and be recognized. And the areas where they need improvement, we can work with them as long as this operation is going on. Other things on good governance, good management, these are things we shall identify through this audit to know areas that the societies need to improve on."

The audit and capacity building of Africa's Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is expected to take three to five years.

The initiative also includes helping the groups attract more donations; establishing corporate partnerships; and finding new technology to meet needs in humanitarian crises.