Sharing a World of Experience
Foreign-aid groups offer advice in hurricanes' aftermath

By Ian Wilhelm

When Arthur B. Keys Jr., a veteran international-aid worker, visited Katrina-ravaged parts of Mississippi, he felt a disturbing sense of déjà vu.

"There's a one-mile swath along the coast where this 45-foot storm surge came in," he says, "and it looks just like Banda Aceh, in Indonesia," after the tsunami hit.

Mr. Keys, president of International Relief and Development, says the scope of the Gulf Coast devastation and its uncanny parallel to the deadly waves that struck South Asia last December, prompted his Arlington, Va.-based organization to provide assistance for the first time to a disaster in the United States.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina -- and to a lesser extent Rita -- has triggered an unprecedented domestic response by nonprofit organizations that traditionally work abroad. About a dozen such organizations, including the American Refugee Committee, Mercy Corps, and World Vision, are working side by side with the U.S. government and churches and charities to provide aid to hurricane victims.

The storms destroyed the homes of more than 500,000 people, causing the largest displacement of Americans since the Civil War. International relief groups say their experiences working in tsunami-damaged countries, where millions of people lost their homes, and war-torn nations with massive migrations of refugees, have taught them lessons that can be applied in the United States.

Among their advice, the foreign-aid groups emphasize the need for the government and charities to pay special attention to the emotional care of the hurricane survivors, as well as the importance of creating strong coordination among relief groups, and to view the disaster as an opportunity to tackle the long-term social ills plaguing the Gulf Coast.

New Alliances
While some charity officials working in the disaster zone say the international organizations are interlopers, many domestic charities have reached out to the overseas assistance groups and forged new alliances.

For example, World Relief, in Baltimore, wrote a booklet on how parishioners and churches can best house and care for hurricane victims after several Southern churches asked for its advice. In the future, such connections will help the international aid charity raise money and supplies for overseas emergencies, such as the tsunami, says Alison D. Lydecker, a disaster-response program officer at World Relief. "Those ties will be very helpful if there's another huge wave," she says.

But many international charities are cautious about expanding into domestic aid. So far most have limited their commitments, mainly working as advisers and sending only a handful of workers to the Gulf region.

In part they lack the resources -- most of their emergency supplies and experienced disaster-aid workers are overseas -- but they also are concerned that larger efforts would overshadow the traditional American disaster charities or dilute their ability to carry out their main duty: helping the neediest people in the poorest places of the world.

"For an agency like ours that really just focuses on international," says Mark Bartollini, a disaster-relief worker at the International Rescue Committee, "there is a serious question about expending our resources in a country of such vast resources."

Similar Challenges
The Indian Ocean tsunamis and the hurricanes that struck the American South have created similar challenges for charities: a massive quantity of displaced people, a vast number of destroyed and damaged houses, and in many places a government response that was deemed inadequate.

In some cases, programs developed in South Asia after the tidal waves swept through are being lifted almost wholesale and applied to the United States.

For example, personnel from the International Rescue Committee are training students and faculty members at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge to help children and teenagers living in churches and other emergency shelters in that city as part of an effort that was developed in Banda Aceh, the region in Indonesia that was hardest hit by the tsunami.

The program, called Ready to Go, provides young people with a way to express their grief after a traumatic event and start having fun again through art and organized games. "The idea is to create an engaging, fun time for the children," says Rachel McKinney, the International Rescue Committee worker leading the training. Ms. McKinney, who ran a similar program in Afghanistan, says nonprofit groups need to understand that children "need structured activities during the immediate time after distress or upheaval, especially for the children not yet registered in schools."

Save the Children, in Westport, Conn., has started a similar effort, transferring a program it has used in Indonesia and
the Palestinian territories that trains teachers in ways to help children cope with traumatic experiences and relieve stress.

While Save the Children has several American antipoverty projects, Hurricane Katrina was the first American disaster it has responded to, says Rudy von Bernuth, managing director of the charity's Children in Emergencies and Crisis program.

"About a day after the levees broke in New Orleans, we decided that this emergency was so much beyond, clearly, both the normal coping capacity of authorities in Louisiana and Mississippi, and that it was on such a scale that we, Save the Children, should mount a response," he says.

Many international relief groups echoed Mr. von Bernuth's remarks, saying the poor government response - and in some places, the inadequate efforts by the American Red Cross -- prompted their Katrina relief efforts.

Indeed, after working in the disaster zone, several international relief groups have stepped up their criticism of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, as well as of state governments and national nonprofit groups, arguing that the charitable response has been poorly organized.

"The coordinating process for private charities needs to be a lot better," says Hugh Q. Parmer, president of the American Refugee Committee, a charity in Minneapolis that organized a team of nurses and doctors from Minnesota medical institutions to provide health care for hurricane survivors in Lafayette, La.

Mr. Parmer says the collaboration among charities in Louisiana was worse than in some developing nations. "This threw us into what looked like, for a little while, a third-world kind of environment," he says.

Not everyone agrees with that assessment. The coordination had "some bumps" in the Gulf region, but the nonprofit response worked well overall, says Anne D. Miller, executive director of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, the organization that works with federal and state authorities to organize charities during a domestic crisis.

Rick Augsburger, deputy director of Church World Service, a charity in New York, that responds to both foreign and American disasters, says international groups may have perceived the situation as chaotic, but were simply unfamiliar with how charities operate in a homegrown disaster.

"Unfortunately, in the response we had a number of organizations who had not responded domestically before who didn't understand the framework that is applied in domestic disasters," he says.

The International Rescue Committee's Mr. Bartollini, who spent three weeks in Baton Rouge last month, did praise the Coordinated Assistance Network, known as CAN, which was established after the 2001 terrorist attacks by the Red Cross and other national nonprofit groups to, among other things, track the charitable and government assistance received by disaster survivors.

But Mr. Bartollini says the effort needs to include more nonprofit groups before the next national emergency occurs.

The network is "a good basic framework," he says. "The problem was it wasn't well known before the crisis hit. This is something FEMA and others should have been promoting."

The Red Cross says its local chapters have invited other nonprofit organizations to join. "We've moved to a new level of cooperation on this disaster response," says Marsha J. Evans, president of the Red Cross.

But while domestic charities have made progress in working together, international aid groups point out one idea they have yet to adopt: emergency standards. For several years overseas disaster workers have relied on a set of guidelines for housing, sanitation, and other charitable services during a crisis.

Such standards are crucial for disasters that displace a large number of people, like the hurricanes, says Michael Wiest, chief operating officer of Catholic Relief Services, in Baltimore. "If somebody's coming in and you're starting to house refugees in a particular situation, you don't have to start with the question 'How much water do I need per refugee?' That's already done," he says. "So it enables you to work more quickly."

Moreover, the international guidelines, known as Sphere, ensure that beneficiaries receive equitable treatment from charities, which helps to avoid perceptions among disaster victims that they are being subjected to double standards, Mr. Wiest says.

To be sure, disasters abroad, including the South Asian tsunamis, have also suffered from some lack of collaboration among nonprofit groups. Despite Sphere and other efforts, getting charitable organizations to work together overseas remains a difficult task.

But the hurricanes may present an opportunity for both domestic and international relief organizations to tackle this perennial problem together.

Historically donors prefer to support "front line" operations and not to pay for administrative expenses, such as building stronger ways to coordinate, says Anisya S. Thomas, managing director of the Fritz Institute, a nonprofit group in San Francisco that seeks to improve humanitarian work. But the Gulf Coast crisis may spur them to see the need for such spending, for disasters both at home and abroad.

"This country really has the resources to learn from this, to devote money to
research," she says. "Because of this emphasis, the whole sector globally can be elevated."

Indeed, Katrina may be an educational experience for international groups as well, says Tiziana C. Dearing, executive director of the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, at Harvard University. "There may be something, for example, that they can draw from the role Wal-Mart has played as a distribution channel that they could then take back and, let's say, apply to the capacity that Coca-Cola has as a distribution channel in Africa," she says.

Katrina also exposed social ills -- such as racial inequity and poverty -- that international development charities and domestic groups have in common. "There are certainly loads of analogues between what we're observing in Katrina and what we have observed in emergency situations in other parts of the world," says Peter D. Bell, chief executive of CARE USA, in Atlanta. "Underlying almost every so-called natural disaster is a social crisis."

Mr. Bell says nondisaster charities should think carefully about the way poverty makes people more vulnerable to a disaster like Katrina and seek support now for projects to reduce poverty, before the news media and the American public's attention fades.

"What we see so often in disasters in other parts of the world is that once that intense media attention goes away, a lot of political will to provide support dissipates," he says.

Despite CARE USA's goal of solving the kind of social inequities and abject poverty revealed by Katrina, its response to the disaster has been limited. The charity gave paid leave to staff members who wanted to volunteer during the crisis, but, says Mr. Bell, "on balance, we decided that we should not pull resources from emergencies across the world."

Other international groups have limited their Katrina efforts because they do not want to draw funds away from national charities that are providing the lion's share of aid to hurricane victims.

"We didn't want to be taking money from the Red Cross or the Salvation Army," says Mr. Parmer of the American Refugee Committee, which raised $50,000 from its board members to pay for its hurricane-related efforts. "We didn't want to appear to be taking advantage of a crisis like this just as a fund-raising opportunity."

That said, some of the international aid charities have raised a significant amount of money for Katrina-related work.

For example, Mercy Corps, in Portland, Ore., has garnered $5.5-million through its Web site, a direct-mail campaign to 131,000 people who have supported the group previously, and a marketing partnership with the music television network VH1.

New Effort
Most of the international groups say they do not plan to make domestic response a permanent part of their charitable efforts.

But at least one organization is shifting its programs to include domestic emergencies as a result of Katrina.

"We see the U.S. as being part of international" now, says Mr. Keys of International Relief and Development. "We are broadening our mandate to include similar situations like this in the future."

While other international aid organizations say such a shift would violate their mission to serve the most impoverished of the world's people, Mr. Keys disagrees.

"Our mission is to help vulnerable groups develop tools of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, so that's exactly what we're trying to help the low-income and neighborhood groups in the Gulf Coast do," he says. "It's totally consistent with our mission."