

Tent in the Auserd camp for Sahrawi refugees in south-west Algeria.

ECHO

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# Echo News

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## In this issue

- 1 The Sahrawi refugees in Algeria
- 1 Chechnya: the humanitarian challenge
- 3 Interview with Carlo Tassara
- 4 Peru: a year and a half after the earthquake

## Chechnya: the humanitarian challenge

Many people forced to flee fighting and insecurity in Chechnya will be spending their fourth year away from home this winter. The second Chechnya conflict has brought immense suffering and even today the poorest people are dependent on humanitarian aid. Chechnya is still experiencing ongoing military operations and there has been large-scale destruction of both infrastructure and dwellings.

As winter approaches, ECHO is committed to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable people, in particular refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). The European Commission has just adopted a new funding decision of €20.5 million to cover the winter months.

Following the outbreak of the conflict in autumn 1999, some 160,000<sup>(1)</sup> people became refugees in Chechnya itself. Three years on, and still displaced within their own country, they face harsh living conditions due to high insecurity, severe shortages of even basic food supplies and scarcely functioning social and healthcare infrastructures. continued on page 2

## Helping the victims of a forgotten crisis: the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria

ECHO's mandate is to provide humanitarian aid impartially, concentrating on those who are most in need. It gives special attention to the victims of "forgotten crises" who find it difficult to obtain assistance in the absence of international media coverage of their plight. ECHO's long-standing support for the Sahrawi refugees is a clear illustration of this needs-based approach.

For more than a quarter of a century, 155,000 refugees from the Western Sahara have been living in limbo in the barren desert of South-West Algeria. They fled to the area around Tindouf in the mid-1970s as the fighters of the Polisario independence movement battled with Moroccan and Mauritanian forces for control of Spain's former colony. Despite a decade-long ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario (Mauritania having abandoned its claim to the southern part of the territory), a permanent political solution has proved elusive and the refugees are still unable to return home.

The Sahrawis have achieved some remarkable things during their 27 years in exile, in particular in educating their young people. But inevitably in such a harsh environment... continued on page 2

Distribution of food to Sahrawi refugees at the Dahkla camp in south-west Algeria.



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A similar number<sup>(1)</sup> fled to neighbouring republics, particularly Ingushetia and Daghestan. Accommodated by local families or living in makeshift settlements, they rely on international aid and the solidarity of their hosts for survival.

**Access to a difficult environment**

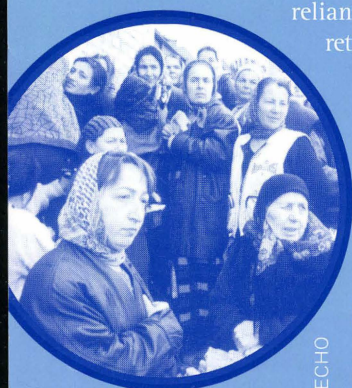
Aid agencies are coping with extremely difficult working conditions in Chechnya. Aid workers often face problems when trying to enter the country, and when they do gain access the security situation is very tense. This creates further problems in the field of communications and independent monitoring of operations. Often forced to monitor by "remote control", the agencies have nevertheless met the basic humanitarian needs of many victims of the crisis. Commenting on the last funding decision Poul Nielson, the Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, said: "Operating conditions remain extremely difficult for humanitarian organisations who have only had irregular access to Chechnya since May 2000 and work in a highly insecure environment." He continued: "I want to pay tribute to the efforts of their staff who have displayed remarkable dedication in such challenging circumstances."

**ECHO's continuing commitment**

Since 1999, ECHO has provided almost €70 million to help the victims of the conflict both in Chechnya and in neighbouring republics, making the EC the largest donor in the area. ECHO-funded operations have focused on priority humanitarian needs, notably in the protection, food, medical, shelter and water/sanitation sectors.

Food aid remains of vital importance especially in Chechnya, where the massive displacement of IDPs has severely disrupted livelihoods and access to food. In the devastated capital of Grozny, the civilian population is being sustained by the action of a few international agencies, the majority of which are funded by ECHO.

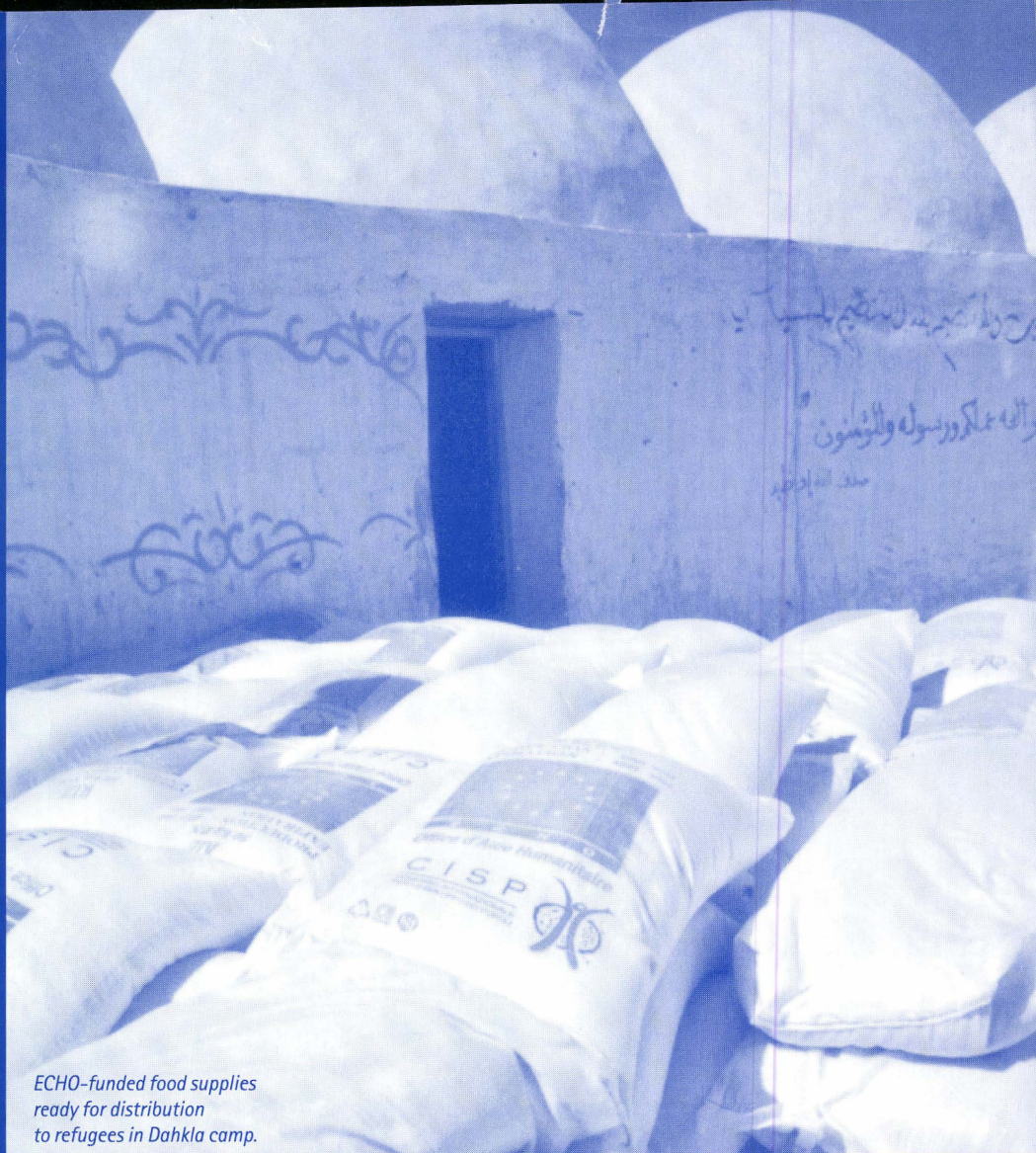
Given the acute shortages of medical supplies and equipment in hospitals, particularly in Chechnya, ECHO's partners are also providing IDPs and other vulnerable people with crucial medical assistance. In addition, ECHO is supporting psychosocial and educational projects focusing on children and young people badly affected by the current situation. The aim is to help them become more self-reliant in anticipation of returning home.



(1) United Nations figures

As winter approaches, the Chechens face a continuing struggle for survival.

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ECHO-funded food supplies ready for distribution to refugees in Dahkla camp.

setting, they need external assistance to meet many of their most essential needs.

The European Commission is the main source of this assistance, a fact which is recognised by both the refugees and by other international humanitarian actors. Since 1993, ECHO has provided relief worth almost €96 million including €14.34 million under its "2002 Global Plan". It works alongside the WFP which is responsible for providing basic food items and UNHCR which oversees the supply of non-food items including tents, blankets, clothing and medicines. It also finances projects run by European NGOs and liaises closely with the Algerian and Sahrawi Red Crescent Societies.

**Maintaining the food pipeline**

A major challenge for the humanitarian agencies is to ensure a regular flow of the supplies that are so vital for the refugees' survival. There have been times in the past when the amount of food available was insufficient to guarantee that each camp resident received the WHO-recommended minimum daily intake of 2100 kilocalories. In 2001, the Commission adopted an emergency decision for €3.77 million, on top of its regular humanitarian assistance, to help resolve this problem. ECHO used the extra funding to establish a food buffer stock covering three months consumption of cereals, pulses, oil and sugar, which are the "basic" products in the food basket. The stock is utilised by the WFP when supplies that have been pledged to it have not arrived in time for the monthly distribu-

**The European Commission is the main source of this assistance, a fact which is recognised by both the refugees and by other international humanitarian actors.**

tion. The UN agency then replenishes the stock once the food in its own pipeline arrives. The system, which is a good example of successful cooperation between ECHO and WFP, has greatly improved the regularity of food distribution. So far, the buffer stock has been used more than a dozen times to meet shortfalls of specific products and, as a result, most of the supply fluctuations have been eliminated.

In its regular programming, ECHO's main emphasis has been to diversify the refugees' diet by supplying complementary food items such as tuna, gofio (grilled maize) and powdered milk. It also supports local production of eggs and livestock and has provided gluten-free wheat flour for children suffering from coeliac disease.

As regards "non-food items" ECHO funds most of the medicines supplied to the refugees as well as the purchase of tents, blankets and clothing kits.

Although the plight of the Western Saharan refugees rarely features in the international media, they clearly have substantial and continuing needs and this is where ECHO plays a crucial role, in line with its mandate to assist the world's most vulnerable populations.

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## Interview

**Carlo Tassara** is the Director of the Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP), a European NGO set up in 1982 and based in Italy. CISP is an active ECHO partner carrying out development, rehabilitation and humanitarian programmes in about 30 countries.

# “The main challenge is to find ways of reducing dependency on external aid”

### **Why did CISP become involved in supporting the Sahrawi refugees in the camps around Tindouf?**

The first field visit done by CISP in the Sahrawi camps was in 1982. At that time, CISP, in close co-operation with other European agencies and associations, provided the Sahrawi refugee camps with different kinds of humanitarian assistance, including logistical back-up, training for technical personnel and medical aid. So when ECHO started to support humanitarian projects in the Sahrawi refugee camps in 1993, CISP – which was already working in the field – immediately became one of its operational partners.

### **What is the main focus of CISP's operations?**

In the Sahrawi camps, in addition to the monitored distribution of relief items, efforts are being made to train local health personnel and to provide the beneficiaries with information and advice on how to use existing resources better. The focus, in other words, is not only on initial relief but also on increasing local capacity to cope with the existing situation.

CISP operates in the camps in the framework of a European NGO Consortium. The aim of the Consortium is to maximise financial and human resources and, at the same time, to employ a unified approach to the management of emergency work. In close

collaboration with ECHO, the Consortium is currently negotiating a new operational agreement with the Sahrawi Red Crescent, which is the local institution in charge of storing the relief items and distributing them to the final beneficiaries.

### **What are the main challenges in operating in such a hostile natural environment?**

The main challenge is to find ways of reducing dependency on external aid. Here there is a “double” challenge. On one side, the lack of productivity of the environment – basically the desert – where the refugees are living. On the other side, the lack of solid and reliable perspectives for a stable and permanent solution of the “Sahrawi crisis”. Nevertheless, despite the difficult and basically unproductive natural environment where the refugees are living, efforts have been made during the long period of exile to produce food items locally. For instance, approximately 100 hectares have been allocated to horticulture, divided into several gardens.

### **It is 27 years since the refugees fled to Algeria and they have been living in the camps ever since. How does the fact that this is a long-running and largely forgotten crisis affect your aid activities?**

If, one day, the Sahrawi population is placed in a permanent secure settlement, their capacity for, and attitude towards, self-reliance will have been seriously damaged by the prolonged

exile. To combat this risk, our humanitarian work in the camps has therefore been oriented towards the mobilisation of local society, including both institutions and families. CISP shares the ECHO priority for forgotten crises, far from the international media. That is why, in close co-operation with ECHO, CISP has undertaken an information programme in Italy to make people aware of the rationale, aims and results of the programmes funded by ECHO in the camps.

### **How would you characterise the role of ECHO in the overall operation to assist the refugees?**

ECHO is the most important donor in the Sahrawi camps, from two points of view. First of all, ECHO is the most significant financial source of assistance, covering a wide range of basic needs: from food aid to medical aid and general relief items for households. Furthermore, the role of ECHO has been and still is extremely important for the definition of global responses to the long-running emergency. One concrete example in this respect is the drawing up of global plans, jointly defined by ECHO, its partner NGOs and the Sahrawi institutions, namely the local Red Crescent and the Ministry of Co-operation. The role of ECHO is well known within the camps. The Sahrawi camps are certainly among the areas of the world where concrete European solidarity is most visible and, what is more important, necessary.

## Annual ECHO Partners conference

# Dialogue with Commissioner Nielson

The annual conference between ECHO and its partners held on 14 and 15 October in Brussels was an opportunity for NGOs to meet the Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Poul Nielson. His speech, which focused mainly on the commitment of both the European Union and ECHO to the values of solidarity and impartiality in humanitarian aid, was warmly welcomed by the NGOs present. They nonetheless expressed concern over the possible impact of the EU's developing Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) on ECHO's work, and stressed the importance of



maintaining a distinct humanitarian “space” to ensure that assistance goes to those who are most in need.

At the end of the two-day meeting, participants in working groups who had been discussing quality, management of human resources and information technologies in humanitarian aid, delivered their conclusions. In particular they proposed leading fieldwork on quality management in conjunction with ECHO, harmonising the status of the humanitarian worker within the European Union and further developing the use of information technologies in the field.



## Southern Africa crisis

### Humanitarian assistance from the European Commission

Between February and August 2002, ECHO approved €20 million for humanitarian programmes in Angola, Madagascar, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Contracts for this amount have been issued to ECHO's partners; international NGOs and UN agencies.

In Angola, programmes focus on nutrition, primary health care and emergency relief in the newly accessible areas. In Malawi, support to nutritional rehabilitation units and food security surveillance systems is being provided. Zambia receives funding for the water, sanitation and health needs of populations in the refugee-affected areas. In Zimbabwe, ECHO assistance is benefiting school-feeding operations, supplementary feeding for young children and food aid operations for displaced farm workers.

An additional allocation of €30 million has just been approved by the Commission and will mainly target programmes in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, the countries most severely affected by the crisis in the region. Programmes under discussion include emergency feeding, logistical support for and monitoring of food aid distribution, water/ sanitation, nutrition and health. Contracts are already being issued and funds will be fully committed by the end of November. A major portion of ECHO's funds will support the strengthening of the capacity of WFP and partners to deliver food aid to those who are most vulnerable and to ensure that the food is distributed strictly on the basis of need.

ECHO works closely with other Commission services, notably the EuropeAid Co-operation office that is providing funding for food aid to the World Food Programme and for seeds and tools through EuronAid, an association of non-governmental organisations supported by the Commission.



## ECHO's global reach

### Afghanistan

(2 decisions) – €26 million

€16.7m – Support for Afghan and Pakistani populations affected by the drought and assistance for the durable reintegration of refugees from

neighbouring countries returning to Afghanistan.

€9.25m – Continuing assistance for returnees to Afghanistan as well as for refugees and internally displaced people still living in camps.

### Western Saharan refugees in Algeria

Global plan – €14.34 million

Assistance for more than 155,000 Western Saharan refugees living in the Tindouf region (South-west Algeria) covering the provision of a range of food items, medical supplies, hygiene products, winter blankets and tent repair kits.

### Iraq

Global plan – €13 million

Support to the victims of the continuing humanitarian crisis in Iraq. The decision covers a range of health and nutritional actions targeting the most vulnerable groups, as well as water and sanitation improvements.

### OTHER RECENT DECISIONS

(of €2 million or more)

**Palestinian Territories:** €7 million – Assistance for the Palestinian victims of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Middle East. Provision of food, non-food items and medical assistance, water operations and protection activities.

**Northern Caucasus (Chechnya):** €4.5 million – Assistance for the victims of the Chechnya conflict until the end of the year. The focus is on providing food, medical assistance, non-food support and shelter.

**Cambodia:** €4.8 million – Support for returnees and populations of remote areas. Water and sanitation, food security, primary health care, small-scale rehabilitation, humanitarian mine-clearance.

**Myanmar (Burma):** €2 million – The funding is being used mainly to boost diagnosis and treatment of malaria, including the provision of drugs, medical equipment and epidemiological surveys, and to improve water and sanitation systems.

**China:** €2 million – Emergency aid for people affected by flooding and mudslides following torrential rains in eight provinces of central and western China.

**India:** €2 million – Humanitarian assistance for victims of conflict in Kashmir and internal violence in Gujarat, as well as for Sri Lankan refugees living in camps in Tamil Nadu.

## Peru: a year and a half after the earthquake<sup>(1)</sup>

18 months after an earthquake shook southern Peru, the Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) continues to support those who were worst-affected. In addition to helping victims rebuild their homes, the focus is on disaster preparedness.

**W**hen a powerful earthquake with a magnitude of 6.9 on the Richter scale struck the southern region of Peru on 23 June 2001, ECHO reacted immediately approving €1.15 million in emergency humanitarian aid on 25 June 2001. More than 200,000 people were affected by the earthquake and about 50,000 houses were destroyed or severely damaged.

It was later decided to continue helping the victims of the earthquake with a second phase of intervention. The objective of this second decision, approved on 9 November 2001 and amounting to €2 million, was to reduce the vulnerability of the poorest families living in rural areas by helping them to rebuild their houses with seismic-resistant designs. The decision also aimed to rehabilitate essential water systems and repair irrigation systems so that local farmers could start producing food again.

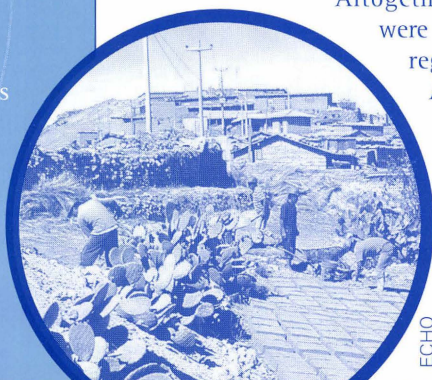
Altogether four operations were implemented in the regions of Ayacucho, Arequipa, Moquegua

and Tacna. ECHO's strategy for 2002 makes disaster preparedness an integral part of humanitarian aid relief and these operations provide a good example of this approach.

ECHO's partners<sup>(2)</sup> have involved the community in implementing the operations from the earliest stage. Risk and vulnerability studies were carried out before starting house construction. Beneficiaries have received training, not only in building techniques, but also in community organisation and disaster preparedness.

Beneficiaries have been building the low-cost houses using traditional materials from the region such as adobe or "quincha" (straw and mud), with the technical assistance of ECHO partners and their local counterparts. Local authorities have also contributed to the success of the projects by providing legal assistance to obtain the property titles or supply raw materials from the region.

At the end of the projects, beneficiary families will have houses that are able to resist earthquakes of similar magnitude. An additional but very significant outcome of the aid work will be the spread of knowledge about improved construction techniques and the way this can help local communities to cope with disasters.



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Help to rebuild seismic-resistant houses.

(1) See ECHO NEWS n° 29, Summer 2001.

(2) COOPI, MPDL, OIKOS and OXFAM.