

HUMANITARIAN DISASTER IN CENTRAL AFRICA EU ACTS SWIFTLY

Goma, Zaïre, 15th July 1994.

A human tidal wave surges over the small border town of 150,000 inhabitants, surrounded by the volcanic mountains that run between Rwanda and Zaïre. An uninterrupted flood of men, women and children, exhausted and frightened by the massacres perpetrated in their country and terrified by rumours which cause the numbers of refugees to grow at an alarming pace. They have only one concern: to save their lives by fleeing Rwanda.

5 days later, 1.2 million people, the equivalent of the population of the whole region of Brussels, poured into this inhospitable corridor consisting of blocks of cooled lava. No water. The small fields cramped on a hillside providing barely enough to feed even the Zaïrian population. All these conditions combined to create a humanitarian disaster of almost biblical proportions.

A terrible feeling of helplessness

An ECHO mission touring the region to visit refugee camps in the neighbouring countries immediately goes to the area, accompanied by a UNHCR representative. On seeing the disastrous situation of the refugees - some have walked over 200 km without pause - a terrible feeling of helplessness overcomes all the humanitarian workers dispatched to Goma. There will be tens of thousands of deaths. No-one could be prepared for an exodus on such a scale, to a place so inaccessible and with such a complete lack of resources. But immediate action is necessary. This is the beginning of the race against death with the number one priority, the water supply.

Around Goma, there is no sea, there are no major roads, the airport is constantly flooded and neighbouring countries which are unstable or in a state of war do not offer easy transit for the aid operations. It is difficult to imagine a bleaker picture. But the situation

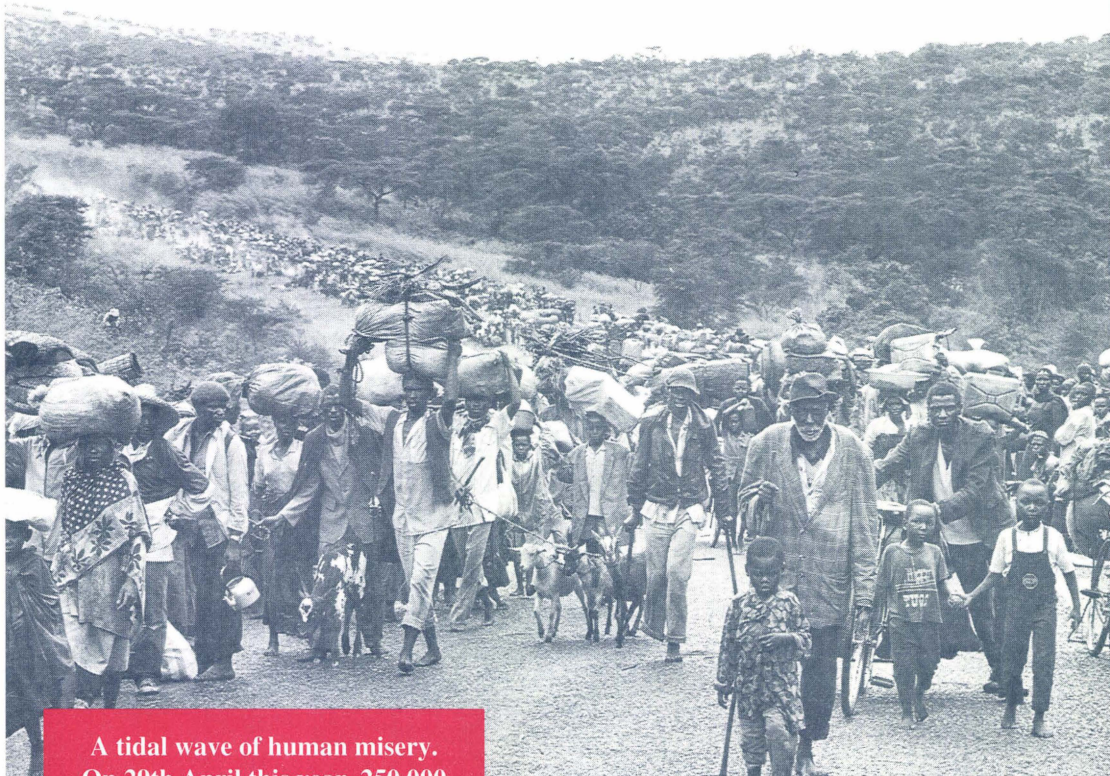


PHOTO HCR

A tidal wave of human misery. On 29th April this year, 250,000 Rwandans crossed the Tanzanian border in 24 hours. Between 15th and 20th July, over a million Rwandans surged into the region of Goma, in Zaïre.

turns from bad to worse. A cholera epidemic breaks out, followed by dysentery. Deaths are numbered in their thousands with so many bodies it is impossible to bury them.

15 days later, the extraordinary efforts of the workers and the rapid reaction of the donors (particularly the European Union and its Member States, the United States, not forgetting the positive effects of Operation Turquoise undertaken by the French government and armed forces) helped to gain greater control of the situation, particularly regarding water supply and control of the cholera epidemic. But the refugees' living conditions remain extremely fragile. Dysentery could wreak havoc if health conditions deteriorate. Insecurity remains a further major problem in the camps because of the presence of former government soldiers among the refugees, and growing tensions

between refugees and the local population. The latter helplessly watching the destruction of its natural environment by the sheer mass of refugees (fields destroyed, trees felled, and so on). The approach of the oncoming rainy season threatens to make matters worse.

Goma: ECHO witnesses the deployment of a mammoth aid operation on the ground

«We were very impressed by the setting up of the whole emergency mechanism» explains Hubert ONIDI, ECHO unit leader. «International organizations and NGOs already present in neighbouring countries mobilized their staff in the region extremely rapidly. We observed the decision-making, distribution of roles, definition of priorities, search for sites to receive the refugees, accompanied by the local authorities, and all the issues that arise in this kind of situation. A very instructive operational experience for ECHO given the logistical complexity of the situation in Goma».

RETURN: THE ONLY WAY OF BRINGING AN END TO THE DISASTER

The only way of bringing an end to this terrible situation is to achieve national reconciliation and the return of the refugees to their country. According to UNHCR principles, repatriation must be voluntary. This means that trust must first be re-established. For the time being, the UNHCR is attempting to encourage people to return. For its part, ECHO is increasing its aid to the organizations present within Rwanda, in particular the ICRC, with a twofold objective: to reinforce housing structures with a view to the return of the refugees, and to assist the populations on site so that they do not, in their turn, also decide to flee en masse.

It is in this same spirit that ECHO approached the NGOs which had left Rwanda following the events of April. The Humanitarian Office encouraged them to resume their operations in the country and, in particular, in the Turquoise zone occupied by French forces to avoid a new exodus to Zaïre.

In order to create the necessary conditions for the return movement, the Commission sent a special envoy to Kigali to form a link between the authorities, international organizations, NGOs and the UN buffer force (UNAMIR).

Cyangugu, medical unit of the ICRC. It is vital to provide assistance to the displaced population inside Rwanda, if any new exodus to neighbouring countries is to be prevented.

Rwandan and Burundi refugees: the overall effort of the European Commission

Since October 1993, 250 million Ecus have been devoted to victims of the Rwandan and Burundi crisis. Together with Member State contributions the total exceeds a figure of 350 million Ecus. The European Union is the main donor of humanitarian aid to central Africa.

GOMA must not make people forget NGARA

There is a continuous flow of information. The scale of the Goma tragedy tends to overshadow the situation in other refugee camps such as that of Benaco (Ngara), in Tanzania, where 250,000 Rwandans flooded in on 29th April this year.

International aid very quickly mobilized to the area helped to avoid the worst there. It has to be said that the conditions for creating a refugee camp were distinctly better there than in Goma, Zaïre.

Coordinated by the UNHCR, the efforts of humanitarian workers on the spot enabled an enormous challenge to be taken up. In 2 weeks, a whole town was built on the Benaco site with all the development work that it implies: kilometres of roads, the construction of a bridge over the river, the sinking of water wells, the installation of pumping stations, the setting-up of

hospitals, dispensaries, storage and distribution warehouses, the erection of thousands of latrines, and so on. Now, living conditions have improved considerably for the refugees as the creation of new relief camps has alleviated overcrowding in the original camp. But the situation remains very unstable, and a large number of humanitarian personnel have been dispatched to Goma since mid July.

A crisis of regional dimensions: 5 Central African countries involved

Since the coup d'état in Burundi in October 1993, one population movement has followed another. There has been a frightening increase in both the number and scale of population displacements in Central Africa. In October 1993, the tragedy of Burundi refugees began. 275,000 of them arrived in Rwanda, 50,000 in Zaïre, 245,000 in Tanzania, without taking into account the 550,000 displaced persons within Burundi.

In April 1994, the double assassination of the Rwandan and Burundi Presidents in Kigali ignited Rwanda this time. 4 months later, 2.3 million Rwandans sought refuge in neighbouring countries (1.5 million in Zaïre, 500,000 in Tanzania, 295,000 in Burundi and 8,000 in Uganda). This latest crisis was a further blow for Burundis who had sought refuge in Rwanda and who were then forced to return to their country or resume their exodus to other countries.

The two successive and intrinsically-linked crises (Burundi and Rwanda) cannot be treated in isolation by humanitarian workers. For this reason, in April 1994 ECHO set up a global aid plan on behalf of the Rwandan and Burundi populations, implemented in the 5 countries involved in the crisis.

ECHO-UNHCR: a new type of collaboration in an exceptional situation

In accordance with its mandate, the UNHCR is responsible for full coordination of aid to refugees and those repatriated in the region. To avoid a splintering of efforts in such an enormous crisis and to ensure more effective intervention, ECHO decided to work with the UNHCR as a single partner, acting as a lead agency for different parts of the operations with specialist NGOs. This is a new operational approach with a single command which will be assessed in the next few months. In the Rwandan interior, ECHO's main partners are the ICRC and some 20 NGOs.

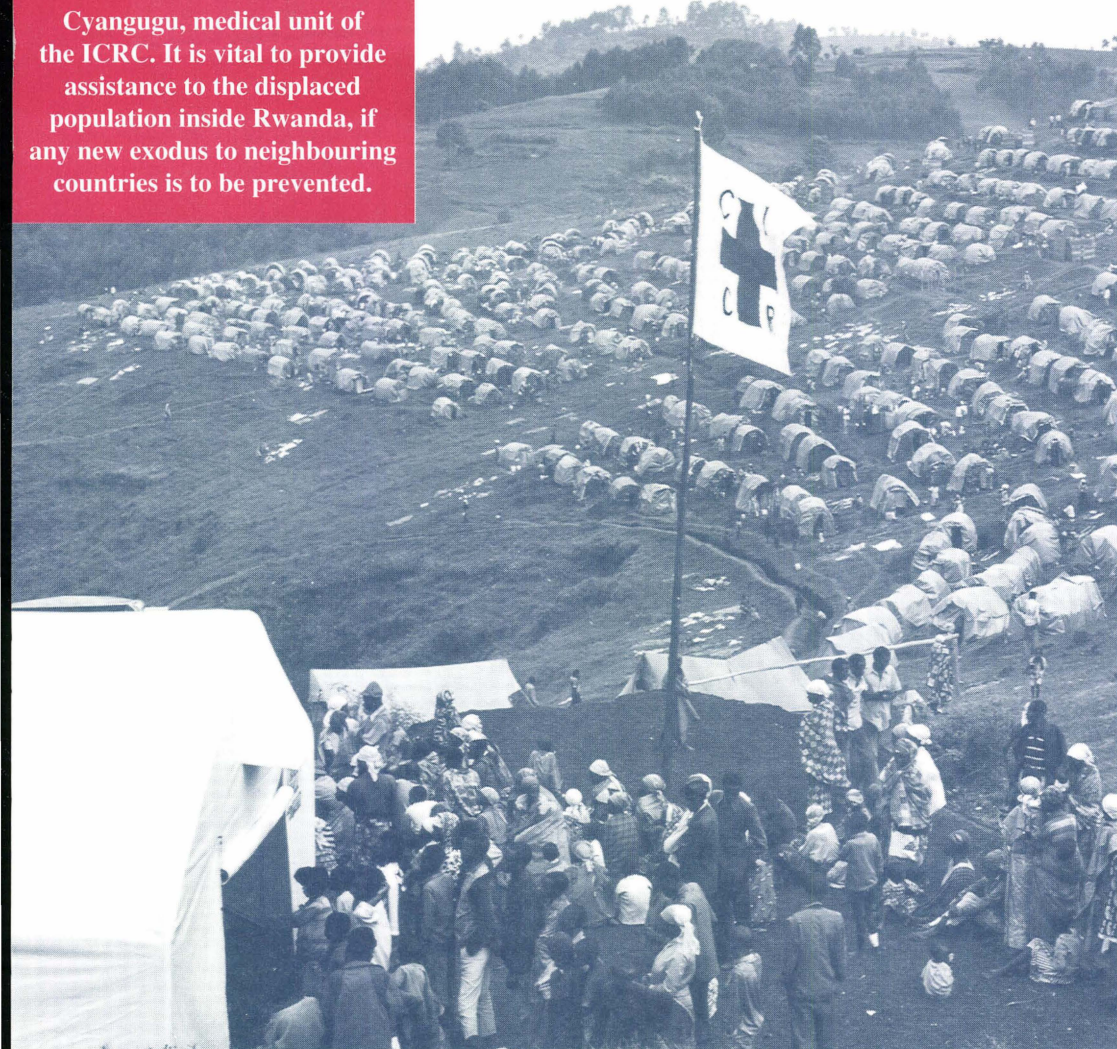


PHOTO CICR



ECHO's global reach

The Caucasus and Central Asia

With the approach of winter which can be bitingly harsh in this region, ECHO has reached a number of decisions on behalf of the populations of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Overall, they concern the provision of food and medical aid and the supply of basic goods to vulnerable populations. All these decisions together represent almost 19 million Ecus for the 3 republics.

In addition, the European Union has set up a vast food aid programme - valued at 204 million Ecus - for the populations of the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Tajikistan and Kirghizia which are experiencing dramatic food problems. ECHO is participating in this through emergency aid programmes amounting to a total of 35 million Ecus. Grains are becoming rare and many groups have eaten neither meat nor fresh produce for over a year. Shortages are beginning to appear in vulnerable groups of the population, victims of conflicts which have completed the destabilization of this region already economically ruined by the disintegration of the

former USSR (see ECHOnews no. 2). Today, it is estimated that the survival of 3 to 5 million people depends entirely on humanitarian aid in the region.

Afghanistan

The daily fighting between rival factions continues to transform Kabul, the capital, into a vast field of ruins. 350,000 people have had to find refuge with their families while 100,000 others squat in public buildings. Nothing works any more, there is no drinkable water, no refuse collection, hospitals are just ticking over due to lack of medical equipment. ECHO's intervention provides medical aid, water supply and drainage operations in the town.

Having fled Kabul, today 150,000 people are living in precarious conditions near Jalalabad as the Pakistani border has been closed. Drinking water needs are not covered in the overpopulated camps where they are housed. ECHO's intervention is concentrated on the water supply there.

Finally, in the north of the country, 39,000 refugees

from Tajikistan are living in harsh conditions in the Mazar-I-Sharif camp. ECHO gives its support to the UNHCR which is responsible for managing this camp.

Since the beginning of the year, ECHO has devoted over 6 million Ecus to Afghan populations in distress.

The West Bank and Gaza

The current period of the transfer of power which the Palestinian populations of Gaza and the West Bank are experiencing is inevitably accompanied by difficulties, particularly acute in humanitarian terms. 2.4 million Ecus have been released by ECHO with the aim of maintaining health infrastructures at an acceptable level during this transitional period. Medicines and medical equipment will be supplied to health centres, while assistance will be provided to improve control of the quality of locally-produced medicines. This action forms part of the overall framework of aid granted by the Commission to the Palestinian people of the West Bank and Gaza.

Report in the field

direct from ECTF

The European Community Task Force's existence reflects the unique nature of humanitarian aid provision in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. The myriad warring factions, the political complexities, the length and scale of the intervention (over 3.3 million beneficiaries in these two countries alone) and, not least, the number of international agencies (over 180) working in the region combine to make the EC Humanitarian Office's normal implementing partner arrangements massively complex. As a result, ECTF's support for ECHO requires each sector to have its own coordinator. James Shepherd-Barron is one such coordinator. This account of a 'standard' two day mission in Croatia reflects the environment in which the European Union attempts to relieve the suffering.

Thursday 11 August 1994

Today, I met up with one of our food-aid convoys as planned at the Refugee Camp of Gasinci in the Croatian «Zupan» of East Slavonia. Twenty-four hours earlier, a young French NGO, Jeunesse sans Frontières, had made the first two distributions of personal hygiene articles under ECHO's «Coordinated Hygienics Programme» to this remote and desolate spot and I was now «following-up» their efforts.

It didn't take me long to make my assessment. Everywhere, clothes were drying on the tentlines and in the leafless trees. Yesterday's powdered detergent was evidently already very much in use. A tooth-less and wrinkled woman tells me «Yes, the soap is very good but we've had to use half of it already». There is no happiness here. No smiles. Only a far-away blankness behind the eyes. Detergent comes, detergent goes. Who cares where it comes from? Who knows when there will be any more?

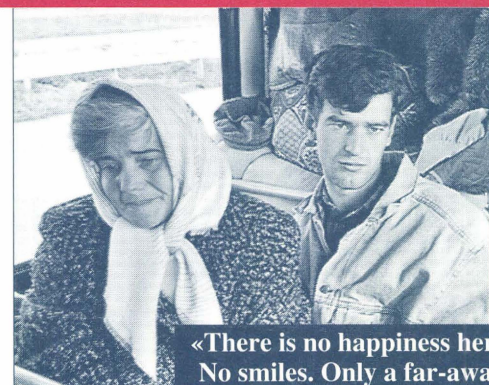
You quickly realise that the European Union, with their 5 million Deutschmarks in aid every day, is a remote and Chimeric concept to these Bosnian hill people.

Friday 12 August 1994

Departed on time at 07.30 with the World Health Organisation's ECHO-funded medical supplies destined for Orasje. Two hours later, we arrive into the tiny Croatian enclave in Northern Bosnia known as the Orasje pocket. Despite clutching sheaves of quite correct and much stamped paperwork and despite the

obvious fact that we were bringing in much needed aid to help them and their people, HVO (Bosnian Croat Military) customs left us perspiring by the barrier while brand new 7-series BMW's with tinted windows passed through un-checked. Eventually, we were sullenly waved through.

Despite being surrounded by hostile Bosnian Serb forces, life in the small town seemed remarkably normal. Fruit and vegetables, though expensive, were in plentiful supply. Even flowers and toys bulged from the market stalls. We had no sooner finished un-loading, though, the trucks having just departed, when I learned for the umpteenth time that appearances flatter to deceive and that the pock-marked tree trunks propped up against windows and doors were not there for architectural embellishment. A distant rumble, that distinctive sound not unlike an approaching thunder storm, had been sporadically going on all morning. You get used to that. The first I knew of in-coming artillery fire was a vicious crack a few streets away, the instantaneous appearance of a greyish-blue cloud of dust mushrooming over the roof tops and the tinkle of falling shards of stone and glass as the cloud begins to drift away. By the time I had turned to stumble with my interpreter into the shadow of a nearby building, the streets had already emptied. One minute the place was bustling. The next, empty. Just paper blowing down the street. Earie. There were three more rounds over the next minute or so but further away. The mournful wail of the air-raid siren, late as ever, was joined shortly afterwards by the higher pitched tone of an ambulance.



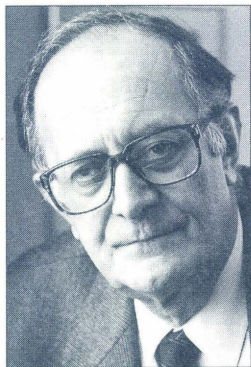
«There is no happiness here. No smiles. Only a far-away blankness behind the eyes.»

Apart from that, no other noise of any kind and still no people. The HVO liaison officer who was with me at the time, emerged from a nearby door completely unruffled and politely suggested that he escort me back to the ferry.

A little later, at the Serb check-point into UNPA West, this time approaching from the other side, I was barred from going any further. Remonstrations that my clearance papers were in order (72 hours notice is mandatory) and that, «furthermore, I personally represent the EU on frequent trips to their «capital» in Banja Luka with the ECHO-funded mobile hospital run by Caritas Denmark» were of no avail. «We know who you are», they said, smiling politely, «but this time go any further and we'll shoot you». All of this said with the utmost charm and in perfect English.

As I re-traced my steps, fuming about the inevitability of missing the evening flight to Split and thus the NGO coordination meeting the next morning, I reflected about the absurd surrealism that goes with the job in this part of the world. Polite and smiling soldiers quite prepared to shoot you, shells from an unseen foe who is just as likely to be your friend as your enemy, dependent solely on which side of the front-line you are standing at the time; shocking deprivation followed by commercial flights to a sunny Dalmatian coast to discuss the desperate plight of over 3 million sad and lonely people.

James Shepherd-Barron



Cornelio Sommaruga
President of the International Committee of the Red Cross



«A false impression is created of the neutrality of humanitarian action if it is defended by weapons».

The ICRC is the only humanitarian organization to have remained within the Rwandan borders after the events of last April. What was your experience of the situation?

We had already been present in Rwanda for three years providing assistance to the many displaced persons in that country. But we never imagined such an explosion of violence. We were caught completely unawares by the scale of the massacres. Our priority was to care for the injured in our hospital set up in a Kigali convent. Then, as the only foreign contact present in the area, we tried to maintain a dialogue with the rival factions. This at least gave us access to the victims and avoided Red Cross staff being the target of massacres. The ICRC also had to play an unusual role during this crisis: that of informer to the international community. Indeed, Red Cross staff represented the only reliable source of information on the ground. Then, we had to go to the aid of a very large number of displaced persons in the country following the huge wave of ethnic violence.

The situation of Rwandan refugees in the neighbouring countries is very critical. For many observers, the return to the country is the only solution. Do you think that the necessary conditions of security for this return exist today?

Obviously, the situation has clearly improved compared to April this year. But the refugee problem cannot be solved overnight. Of course, I believe that the return is necessary but it should not be hasty. There are risks of «vendetta» and we cannot say today that conditions of security have been re-established everywhere in Rwanda. I am, however, pleased to see that the economic situation is not so bad. There was a good harvest season, although in some regions there was no-one to harvest the crops...

In short, I agree with the return of the refugees but in a

specific order. The current government must be given time to get organized and the return must be purely voluntary.

Humanitarian operations do not always get a good press. The «fiasco» in Somalia or the humanitarian alibi in the former Yugoslavia are often mentioned. What is a successful humanitarian operation?

A successful humanitarian operation is one which gives neutral or impartial organizations access to the victims. One of the major problems that we have encountered over the last few years, is the utter confusion which results from the integrated approach of political, military and humanitarian elements. The perception of these operations has caused a number of difficulties on the ground. That is why we are calling for the humanitarian arena to be left to organizations which can act completely impartially. Gradually, people are realizing, even in the Security Council, that tasks of a humanitarian nature cannot be given to troops. A false impression of the neutrality of a humanitarian action is created if it is defended by weapons. In my view, military operations (on the basis of chapter 7 of the UN Charter) contrary to or without the approval of the parties involved, must be policing operations with the aim of restoring order and security. In the space created by this, the humanitarian organizations can act on behalf of the victims. But I should like, of course, to express my admiration for all those who, accompanied by soldiers or otherwise, work in the humanitarian field because they do all they can to help the victims. The problem is at a higher level; it is a problem of mandate, a problem of resources and a problem of coherence between the governments' political declarations and the reality on the ground.

Acting with discretion, without pointing an accusing finger is one of the principles of ICRC action. Isn't it difficult to keep to that duty of reserve in some situations?

This is a problem faced by everyone who works in the ICRC. Up to what point can we remain silent when we witness atrocities? Our tenet is as follows: under no circumstances will we make public declarations if there is a risk of endangering the victims. Their interests come first. When we depart from our reserve, it is because there is no longer any other way of assisting the victim. The ICRC rarely makes public declarations. As president, I have made 4 formal declarations, two concerning Bosnia, one on behalf of Somalia and another regarding Rwanda. The latter was a real cry of alarm to the international community. «If international humanitarian law can be violated with impunity in that way, there is a danger of trivializing its provisions, and we will see the emergence of similar situations elsewhere.» The ICRC was therefore appealing for a «policing» intervention by the international community because there is no sense in humanitarian assistance if the massacres continue. First of all, order has to be reestablished to permit access to the victims.

What does the creation of ECHO represent for you?

I have followed with interest the European Union's wish to set up structures directly focused on humanitarian action. What's more, the ICRC was the first organization to sign the framework partnership contract with the Community which is one of our main donors. My colleagues and I are keen to continue our close contacts with ECHO. For my part, I am aware of the European Union's wish to be present in the field of humanitarian action, I am delighted about that and I will do everything in my power to make this collaboration as effective as possible.

*Interview by Isabelle Brusselmans
for ECHOnews*

«On behalf of the Belgian Red Cross, I should like to thank the European Union, in particular, for its significant support».



These are the words of the President of the Belgian Red Cross, HRH Princess Astrid, at the press conference given on 19th August this year to review the situation in Rwanda and the border countries.

Since the beginning of the Rwandan crisis (December 1993), ECHO has granted 1.7 million Ecus to the Belgian Red Cross to support its aid operations in this country.

TRAGIC INCIDENT IN SERBIA

It is with great sadness that the whole distribution of direct food aid to Serbia/ ECHO team announces the loss of one of its colleagues, Isabelle Achour, who was working on the ground in Nis (Serbia). On the evening of 4th August this year, following a tragic combination of circumstances, she was fatally injured during an exchange of shots between the police and a Serbian delinquent. Isabelle had been recruited by ECHO to reinforce the Belgrade Office which is responsible for the distribution of direct food aid to Serbia/ Montenegro. She joined us in mid June. Her smile, competence and charm soon made her well liked by the whole team there. We were unfortunately only able to glimpse her determination, will and professionalism but that was enough to win us over. This tragedy only increases the burden of the heavy cost of human lives paid by the international community in the context of its humanitarian missions.