

Humanitarian Aid

The legal basis of the Humanitarian Aid policy are Article 177 to 181 of the Treaty establishing the European Community.

The EU is present in all trouble spots including Iraq (where it has completed a humanitarian and reconstruction programme worth €320 million with another €200 million to come in 2005), Afghanistan, the Palestinian Territories, and several parts of Africa. Its relief activities are global, these include the northern Caucasus (especially Chechnya), Tajikistan in central Asia, the Western Sahara and Sri Lanka. The EU was one of the biggest contributors to the international relief effort following the Asian tsunami disaster of December 2004.

ECHO

The European Union's relief operations are handled by ECHO, its humanitarian aid office. Its budget runs to more than €500 million a year. It has operated in 82 countries around the world since 1992.

In recent years, about two thirds of the EU's relief effort has been channelled to NGOs with about 20% going to UN agencies and 10% to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Exit strategy and the grey area

Disaster relief and emergency assistance are almost by definition short-term. Operations funded by the EU generally last for less than six months. But the Union wants to ensure that, when humanitarian aid is withdrawn, the people it has helped can once again cope with the situation, or that another form of longer-term development assistance is available to take over. The transition from disaster relief to the follow-on phase of recovery is a difficult grey area, with the risk that nothing is in place after humanitarian relief is phased out.

The EU has already completed its exit strategy in the Balkans. The switch away from the Balkans freed up funds for emergency operations in the Middle East, Asia and especially Africa. Post-conflict operations are under way in Liberia, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Darfur in western Sudan, while measures are being taken to tackle the severe food shortages affecting several southern African countries.