

No land is no man's

EMMA BONINO

Former Chairman of the Trustees Committee,
currently Minister for International Trade and European Policies

I was in Aden, Yemen, when it happened. And even there the sea suddenly turned strange, threatening, as did the sky. But nothing made me think there had been a catastrophe: only that evening did the TV images in my hotel room reveal the ruinous scale of the tsunami. Like everyone else, I immediately wondered whether there were any friends or relatives among the thousands and thousands of Italian tourists; and like so many others, immediately after that I tried to figure out just what a "tsunami" was. I could not have imagined that I would be asked by the Italian government to involve myself in it, even collaterally, but an automatic reflex, as former European Commissioner for humanitarian aid, forced me to stay in front of the TV to figure out the dynamics, the consequences and above all the "What can be done?" By analogy, I thought of Hurricane Mitch that devastated homes, bridges and roads, wiping out entire towns and villages in Central America. That catastrophe was deeply felt by the Spaniards, by virtue of cultural proximity, who mobilised en masse. In Italy, as in other European countries, there was little talk of it and, consequently, there was not much emotion or mobilisation. Somehow the area devastated by the tsunami was closer to us, because millions of Italians had been going there for years, and several thousand of our citizens were on vacation there just then. Back in Italy, I found the country collectively moved and involved, proving that, despite the best intentions, not all tragedies are equal in everyone's eyes. RAI covered it steadily. The response by Civil Protection and the

government institutions was immediate and effective. Our rescued citizens recounted tales of horror and fear, but also of gratitude for the rescue, and many expressed their will to help and not abandon those people. Unexpectedly, Undersecretary Gianni Letta asked me whether I wanted to be part of a Trustees Committee to contribute to ensuring proper and transparent management of a significant sum of money collected via SMS among private citizens, the result of a campaign launched by some mobile telephony operators and turned over to Civil Protection as head of the emergency rescue and reconstruction operations. I accepted without hesitation, happy to know that I had been called to work with my colleagues: Senator for

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Life Giorgio Napolitano, President Amato, President Andreotti and Dr. Andrea Monorchio. We met regularly; we gave suggestions and made proposals, aware that given such a huge collection of private funds we needed to inform citizen donors almost in real time of the decisions and operations under way, of the difficulties involved in responding urgently in areas that had their own rules, their own institutions, their own

bureaucracies with which we had to dialogue, because you can never intervene in “no man’s land”. Obviously I won’t want to go into great detail here, but perhaps it is worthwhile to underscore various aspects of this experience that merit consideration for the future. First. There will be an increasing need to combine private funds with public funds, with collection tools that are innovative but fast, very fast.

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Second. In natural catastrophes of this size, resources (air transport, logistics, detailed information from the scene...) are often needed that are not available even to the most capable and efficient NGOs but only to the armed forces. That is, they require an integrated response with resources and tools capable of resolving immense logistical problems, as well as specific skills that can, for example, point out the risks involved in mass population transfers, or imprudent reconstruction efforts poorly suited to the local situation. In short, everything is needed, from the biggest (road reconstruction, for example) to the smallest, or what appears small: taking care of the orphans and the elderly, of the most vulnerable segments of the surviving populations... I liked that aspect of this experience as well: after some initial difficulties, Civil Protection, NGOs, microcredit programmes, experienced volunteers and novice volunteers were all able to work together, respecting local laws but also attempting to overcome

our bureaucracies and theirs, with one clear objective: making sure the famous 50 million-plus Euros were of real help.

Third. The importance of identifying geographic and sector priorities. Given the figure, significant for us but objectively very little compared to the need, we were forced to choose to limit our choice to just one country: Sri Lanka. We then selected the priority reconstruction sectors, favouring infrastructures that would remain over time: schools, hospitals, housing for fishermen....

Fourth. Maintaining a certain flexibility in order to correct – or cancel – in mid-stream projects that proved impossible for political, security or bureaucratic reasons.

With President Amato and Dr. Monorchio we made two visits to Sri Lanka. From south to north, we met with local authorities and our volunteer and other operators, sharing certain frustrations with them. In Sri Lanka the hardest thing to find is public land on which to build. And of course we could not just “occupy” these scarce lands but had to obtain them from the authorities. Then, as always, the tortuous choice of whom to help and whom not to help...and the difficulty of communicating the “good news” to the donors, the big and little successes achieved because of their generosity: as we know, only bad news makes the news. The documents collected here are an exhaustive and complete report of what Italy’s Civil Protection did in Sri Lanka.

The Trustees Committee was turned over in 2006, because three of us – President Napolitano, Amato and I – had assumed other responsibilities. we were replaced by Fernanda Contri, Dr. Gianni Letta and Ambassador Ferdinando Salleo. The turnover was sealed by an intense meeting at the Quirinale. Civil Protection

wanted to give each of us a drawing made by Sri Lankan kids who had participated in a show organised by the Prime Minister's Office and by Civil Protection, on display in the Chamber of Representatives and then on tour through many Italian cities. The drawing given to me, which I like a great deal, is now hanging in my office.

Accounting in the field

ANGELO BORRELLI

DPC, Director General of the Administration and Finance Office

As head of the Department's Administration and Finance Office, over the last few years I had to face a formidable overload of work associated with our efforts in Sri Lanka; it was tiring because it came in addition to our daily work, but it was wonderful because of the extraordinary experience it permitted me. When one is in administration and accounting, it does not often happen that one feels part of a humanitarian aid operation in a far-off country.

From December 26, 2004, to January 3, 2005, during management of the operations to rescue Italians hit by the tsunami in Southeast Asia via an air bridge, I transferred full-time to the Department's Operations Room; I leased aircraft, I purchased materials, I handled customs documents relating to the materials and aid we had shipped to the stricken area, and those for delivery to the final recipients. But this was in some way ordinary administration, at least for someone in Civil Protection: I had already worked for days dealing with problems like these during other rescue missions abroad.

The news came at that time that we would be dealing not just with the emergency but would have to carry out

a programme of projects and aid in Sri Lanka lasting longer than usual, because the Department had been entrusted with significant sums of money, from various promoters of solidarity fundraising for the victims of the tsunami who had achieved extraordinary results. From the very first days, we knew that we would have available more than 40 million Euros, which in subsequent months rose to 50 million.

I participated personally in all phases of this operation, first preparing the specific regulations we had to draft and then managing both information from Sri Lanka and the payments to be made as the work progressed. There were so many meetings, with the Department head, Guido Bertolaso, with Vincenzo Spaziante, his deputy, with Agostino Miozzo, head of mission in Sri

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Lanka, with Angelo Canale, chairman of the quickly established Audit Commission, that it seemed like one continuous meeting, often interrupted by the demands of everyone's normal work, but then quickly resumed. In January 2005 we all had the tools we needed to work, especially for learning how to behave with the resources consisting of the donations entrusted to us. For those resources coming from the Department's budget, both those invested in the projects of the General Programme and those relating to management expenses, there were no particular problems to resolve, since everything occurred normally in compliance with ordinary

administrative-accounting regulations (State Accounting Act, Community legislation and internal regulations of the Prime Minister's Office). For those resources coming from donations, kept rigorously separate with dedicated

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accounts both in Italy and in Sri Lanka, we built up a regulatory system that took into account three separate sources: ordinary administrative-accounting standards, those used by Cooperazione Italiana and by the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and those in use at the Community level, especially by ECHO (European Commission Humanitarian Office). In order to regulate and make consistent and manageable the unique organisational and operational aspects of the mission, 14 Civil Protection ordinances were issued, four by the end of January 2005 and another nine by December 2005, and one in January 2006. They were all published on the Department's Web site. In addition, various instructions were issued by the head of the Department to define the structure and composition of the temporary mission in Sri Lanka and the operations centres set up in the areas of Trincomalee and Galle, as well as directives for use of the financial resources. In compliance with this system of rules, we set up a permanent hook-up between Rome and Colombo, with the support of a computer software

that enabled us to proceed as if our offices were not separated by five time zones and more than 10,000 kilometres. Transactions in the three bank accounts that we used and management of the cash on hand in Colombo were monitored continuously, like recordings of allocation documents and the expenditures made. This system obviated the need for delegating authority to the personnel in Sri Lanka, because everything was done in real time between Rome and Colombo: all payments were prepared in Italy by the head of Department or his deputy. I presented a quarterly report for the Audit Commission on the progress of the efforts and the sums collected and spent. With regard to reporting, it should be noted that the Department's activity in Sri Lanka can be summarised with data other than those normally used, less eloquent than others referring to concrete achievements but equally indicative of careful, precise and scrupulous work, which followed step by step the commitment of our colleagues and partners in the field. During our efforts in Sri Lanka, in running the General Programme of intervention:

- 188 contracts were signed;
- 1,719 payment orders were prepared;
- 234 bank transfers were made to third parties from the "Italian donations account" and 155 credit transfers were done to the "Sri Lanka donations account";
- 435 cheques and one bank transfer were issued from the "Sri Lanka donations account";
- 376 cheques were issued from the "Sri Lanka operating account";
- treasury personnel recorded 3,261 transactions in the accounting books (including 1,997 in Colombo, 1,047 in Trincomalee and Kinniya and 217 in Galle).

I had immediate and direct evidence of the worthiness of the effort behind those figures I just reported as I coordinated the activity of the working group in charge of administrative and accounting audit and reporting, consisting of experts from various government departments, which examined all documents relating to every expenditure made by the actuators in running the Programme, and it reached positive conclusions on each individual report thanks to the quality of the data we produced and collected. If we were able to meet the deadlines we gave ourselves, except for extensions granted to take into account the local situation, this is certainly due to the speed with which we met the agreed payment deadlines, both with the actuators and with the local firms that worked for us. And this gives me great satisfaction: in a Programme that had to be accurate, fast, transparent and heavy on the results right from the start, I never felt that I represented an ancillary department, a “filing cabinet” set up especially to delay and complicate things, but rather an official called on to take part and share in analysing problems and identifying and implementing solutions, without any distinction between administrative and operational functions.

Auditing: a forecast and prevention tool

ANGELO CANALE

Deputy Attorney General for the Court of Auditors

Several years ago, in the State Counsel’s Office with the Court of Auditors, I was able to see how the Civil Protection Department had managed public assets and resources during a mission abroad.

This was the so-called “Rainbow Mission” and, at the time, even acknowledging the positive results that the mission had achieved in an especially difficult context, I decided to point out what seemed to the sensibilities of the officials of the Court of Auditors to be shortcomings in the administrative system and the system of accounting and legal audits, which had led to certain episodes of poor administration. With that as my background, in the wake of the tsunami I agreed to chair a commission made up of myself, Antonio De Santis and Dr. Carlo Tixon, which was charged with legal auditing of the efforts of the Civil Protection Department on behalf of the victims of the tsunami.

I was offered this position by the head of the Department, Guido Bertolaso, and his deputy, Vincenzo Spaziante: I accepted without reservation. De Santis and Tixon, with whose professionalism and openness I had been familiar for years, also joined in with enthusiasm and a constructive spirit. And in fact the Civil Protection personnel assigned to Sri Lanka, both men and women, were a constant testimony to this spirit.

The Commission, established by decree of the head of the Civil Protection Department on January 10, 2005, pursuant to article 1, par. 4, of the ordinance of the Prime Minister n. 3392 of 8 January 2005, set to work immediately, receiving – this needs to be said with the utmost clarity – maximum cooperation from the Civil Protection Department, which had developed, after the “Rainbow Mission” experience, a new and different ethic in resource management, marked not just as is required by efficacy and efficiency aimed at achieving the prompt and concrete

results required of an institution that works in emergencies but also by constant monitoring, absolute transparency, compliance with the rules, and an effective auditing system.

I must confess that in accepting the assignment, which presented many unknowns, I was excited by the idea of putting myself and my ideas to the test: for me, the challenge was to demonstrate that rules and controls, if applied to emergency situations with the proper degree of flexibility, do not conflict with efficiency and effectiveness of civil protection efforts. These were the feelings I experienced as I prepared with the other members to establish, practically from nothing, the Commission's work methods, the rules that it would have to follow, and its objectives. As for work methods, it was decided that the Commission, while fulfilling its role and various responsibilities, would be a constant and dynamic point of reference for the top management of the Civil Protection Department, whose management of private donations it would be evaluating; however, it would also never fail to make to top management any comment, suggestion, indication or even, if necessary, a criticism. A sort of "collaborative audit", in short. It was in this context that the members of the Legal Audit Commission often went to Sri Lanka and participated in the Department's operations meetings, making notes and comments when appropriate, but also, as part of the job, providing appreciation and support, as an outsider to the Department but with a unity of intention with respect to the objectives pursued and finally – it can be said – achieved. It was also decided right from the first formal meeting that the Commission would make public its

own activities and observations, through reports published on the Civil Protection Department's Web site. This decision was inspired by transparency and by respect for the Italian donors. The work we did was condensed into ten reports which, because of the collaborative nature of the audit conducted, went well beyond the twenty or so formal meetings.

I still remember very clearly the many teleconferencing calls with mission personnel to seek the best solutions to administrative-accounting problems that cropped up from time to time and that always presented new twists. I remember the evenings we spent in hotels in Colombo, reading draft contracts and memos, studying the European ECHO regulations and any possible exceptions or adaptations to the

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specific situation, discussing how to deal with so many obstacles.

It should in fact be said that the Mission had to face a series of new issues, from the legal nature of the donations and the consequent legal implications for their management, to the need to always keep

financial liquidity under control (and here we reached a truly high level of efficiency through computer programmes, which in both Italy and Sri Lanka provided a real-time dynamic overview of the situation, allowing prompt and effective controls); from the relationship with the NGOs responsible for implementing some of the projects under contract, to the problem of the local VAT; from studying and necessarily applying Sri Lankan legislation to the firm maintenance, regardless, of the general rules and principles of our own system from legal disputes with local companies to problems associated with an inflexible bureaucracy lacking the legal tools with which to deal with the emergency. Through all these problems and many others (and finally in auditing the reports), the Legal Audit Commission was present. A good job was done by the Department, by the NGOs, and by all. The results – in cement and bricks, but not only (microcredit, boats, etc.) – are there to prove it, and the men and women of the Civil Protection Department are rightly proud of them. For my part and for the work done by the Commission that I had the responsibility and privilege of chairing, I think I can assure all Italian donors that the money given by each one was spent properly and diligently in the sole interest of the populations affected by the tsunami, who on so many occasions demonstrated their touching gratitude towards the Italian personnel.

In Colombo or in Galle, or in the other areas hit hard by the tsunami, wearing the Civil Protection vest, in the colours of the Italian flag, which I also wore with pride, inevitably attracted expressions of sympathy, friendship and affection.

Ensuring a quality humanitarian response

DAVIDE MARTINA

Humanitarian aid expert, director of the Punto.sud Association

The entire operation in Sri Lanka had one constant that accompanied it from the first phases through November 2007: constant attention to audit, monitoring and transparency in every aspect associated with the proper use of the funds collected through the solidarity of Italians in the wake of the tsunami in Southeast Asia. The involvement of the media and the growing sensitivity of public opinion for the simple or complex humanitarian operations that have characterised the last decade have created an ever-growing interest in emergency operations and seen a growing professionalisation of the institutions and personnel involved in various roles in humanitarian responses. But there was always a “reservation of doubt”, because humanitarian responses in the past had almost never ensured transparency for those who donated, constant monitoring of the actuators in the project implementation phase, and a guarantee of results for the beneficiaries.

With the tsunami emergency, however, right from the first phases after the calamity, through the creation of the Trustees Committee and the appointment of a commission to audit the accounting and legality of the efforts made by the Civil Protection Department, there was a desire to send a clear message to the tens of millions of Italians who participated in the marathon of generosity to provide aid to the victims: whereas in the past and in the current international humanitarian approach there are both bright spots and shadows, this operation was to be marked by a concrete guarantee of

Operational instruments

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auditing, monitoring, evaluation and transparency. One fact above all, of international importance: for the first time, a large-scale humanitarian aid operation was shared in real time and in all its phases on the Internet site of the institution responsible for managing the funds and implementing the scheduled measures, The Department constantly published the complete texts of decrees, regulations, projects, progress reports, activity reports and financial updates in a special area of its site. The Punto.sud Association was involved in this process of outside observation that the Department insisted on, together with Action Aid and the Italian Monitoring Society. The IMS conducted two field missions and produced two reports, which summarised the progress of the programmes. Action Aid did a study that focused on the approach used by "System Italy" during the tsunami emergency. The Punto.sud Association maintained a constant document audit for the DPC on reports sent by the NGOs and other entities and institutions that collaborated in carrying out the General Programme: it arranged training sessions in Sri Lanka for personnel involved in the humanitarian efforts; and finally, it provided constant "help desk" support for all operators involved in Sri Lanka, intended to facilitate compliance with the regulations and procedures established by the Department, with clarifications provided "live".

Participating in the Department's programme in Sri Lanka was for me an experience of extraordinary worth, both professional and human. In the emergency, I was able to optimise my previous experiences and witnessed the creation and testing of a "model" for managing humanitarian aid efforts that was decidedly different from those normally in use.

I consider the method used by the Department to formulate "rules valid for everyone" to be a winning one, both for actuators and for directly managed projects, regulations to be followed in setting up projects and during their implementation, specifying unique formats and reporting schedules, works contracting methods, clauses for supplier selection, criteria for flexibility and exceptions, documentation and reporting requirements. It must be recalled that in 2005 there were no nationwide "rules of the game" already written, and the diffuse fundraising practices intended for humanitarian aid were awaiting – and still await – precise rules from parliament on conditions of use.

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Therefore, the General Programme was run using an ad hoc system of regulations written in a climate of great cooperation: the conditions for running the projects carried out in Sri Lanka were defined in an open dialogue among the Department's managers, the members of the guarantee and control bodies immediately set up, the representatives of the NGOs and other institutions that played the role of actuators, which led to the formal approval of the regulations which were then adopted and used by Civil Protection. This made it possible immediately to have clear and

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definite shared rules, criteria of admissibility for precise costs that could be consulted at any time, established and written to prevent any slack, grey areas, or slippery slopes of interpretation.

In addition to this, the on-site presence of the mission and the continuity of direct management in the field made it possible to prevent the need to modify projects from becoming a problem, allowing an uninterrupted but monitored series of variants to take into account any new fact in real time. It is a lack of flexibility and

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immediate answers that often gives rise, in all those who work in the humanitarian aid field, to the idea that it is impossible to comply rigorously with the rules and achieve satisfactory results.

With its General Programme, the Department shattered this myth, establishing a system of rules but also constant “help desk” support perfectly compatible with the significant results obtained in the projects in reasonably short times, even though this was a complex and far-reaching effort.

The third important new feature I experienced working with Civil Protection was the internalisation of the monitoring and audit procedures, which became a formal part of the Programme rather than being viewed as managerial activities, possibly of lesser import than

concrete achievements. Much of the lack of transparency and clarity in so many cooperative and humanitarian aid operations originates in the idea that auditing and monitoring come “after” the effort, both logically and temporally. This is not true: if how and what to audit, which data and which documents need to be produced to account for what is being done is not defined beforehand, it will never be possible to have a reliable, certifiable, verifiable final report down to the last hundredth of a Euro, as we managed to do for the projects managed in Sri Lanka precisely because of the Department’s determination to consider the “accounting” as important as what is accounted for. The final important aspect I want to cite involves the makeup of the “team” that carried out the Programme: as varied, diverse and far-ranging as can be imagined. The results are due to NGOs, civil protection volunteer organisations, Italian public institutions and international agencies, personnel within the Department and professionals and experts recruited ad hoc, to people who agreed to be co-responsible for the decisions, like members of the Trustees Committee, the Audit Commission, the working group for verifying reports, to civil service volunteers and to professionals with brilliant careers behind them. And yet, to manage this variegated company of actors, the Department merely followed the determination of its top management and the working methods typical of Civil Protection, which, as is often repeated, precisely because it “is not a body but a function”, created the need for real and effective coordination and the answer to this vital need, so often lacking when people with different backgrounds and approaches participate in the same adventure. Perhaps it was precisely this meeting of the modus

operandi of the National Civil Protection Service and that of international aid operations that produced the “model” used in Sri Lanka, which demonstrated the feasibility of civilian operations in which the entire country participates as a system. As someone who participated in its development, I tested it in the field, seeing firsthand efforts, costs and results, and it convinced me that it is a successful model, repeatable and exportable, something that will last and bear fruit on other occasions and in other contexts, which it would truly be a waste to consider just as the chance result of a series of coincidences and chances: the intention was to ensure quality humanitarian responses.

