



NORTH AMERICAN  
HUMANITARIAN  
RESPONSE SUMMIT



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# NORTH AMERICAN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE SUMMIT (NAHRS) PROJECT

## MEXICO PREPARATORY MEETING REPORT

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## 1. Introduction

There exist many different efforts (laws, legal authorities, compacts, memoranda of understanding, projects) related to strengthening cross border support during crises in North America. However, there is limited comprehensive understanding of these various efforts beyond the entities directly involved. This siloed approach across the three countries (Canada, Mexico and the United States), combined with significant bureaucratic barriers, will impede response efforts during a potential catastrophic disaster response when the rapid flow of humanitarian assistance (professional personnel, equipment and supplies) is required to save lives and reduce suffering.

The North American Humanitarian Response Summit (NAHRS) project represents a unique effort to improve the effectiveness of cross-border response to a potential catastrophic disaster in North America. NAHRS is implemented by the American Red Cross in partnership with the Canadian Red Cross and Mexican Red Cross, and with the participation of the countries' respective federal, state and provincial government entities involved in disaster response. NAHRS objectives include:

- Identifying barriers and relevant work completed to date;
- Working to improve communication, coordination, collaboration and diplomatic relations and the exchange of ideas amongst all major parties involved; and
- Seeking to identify clear and quantifiable next steps to prepare for a major catastrophic response.

The NAHRS project was initiated on September 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>, 2017 with a Convening Meeting at the American Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington, DC for NAHRS stakeholders from Canada, Mexico and the United States (US). The meeting socialized the project's goals and laid the foundation for the remainder of the effort. After the Convening Meeting, Preparatory Meetings were held to focus on country-specific barriers, gaps and solutions to cross border coordination and support during catastrophic disaster responses. The first preparatory meeting took place from December 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in Mexico City, where participants from the Mexican Red Cross and Mexican Government gathered to pinpoint opportunities and barriers related to cross-border response to a catastrophic disaster in Mexico.

## 2. Meeting Methodology

The Mexico Preparatory Meeting centered around an interactive Table Top Exercise (TTX), in which facilitators presented a catastrophic disaster scenario to engage participants to consider the triggers, requirements and protocols involved with accepting international aid from North American partners. The disaster scenario used was a 'Popocatepetl Eruption Scenario,' in which the Popocatepetl volcano erupts at an unprecedented magnitude. In the simulation the 'super volcano,' which lies 70km from Mexico City, kills 500,000 persons and affects another 10 million people, effectively overwhelming the Mexican national response systems and forcing personnel to consider the mechanisms related to accepting international aid from North American neighbors.

The use of an extreme event helped participants suspend disbelief related to the acceptance of international assistance and imagine a situation in which national response capacities would be

completely overwhelmed. Such an event would have significant and devastating economic and social impacts, presenting difficult moral dilemmas related to the prioritization of needs. This approach provided a frame for ensuing plenary and group discussions.

On Day 1 of the NAHRS Mexico Preparatory Meeting, key Mexican Red Cross disaster response personnel walked through the catastrophic disaster TTX. Attendees were split into groups, where they collaborated to work through TTX injects on an interactive online platform developed by Global Emergency Group (GEG) in partnership with the Urban Resilience Platform. Facilitators led each group through NAHRS key topic areas, making note of central challenges and themes presented across groups. Real-time Spanish-English translation was offered for participants.

On the second day of the meeting, officials from the Mexican government joined Mexican Red Cross representatives to add strategic input related to the TTX outputs. The whole group then came together to close the NAHRS Mexico preparatory meeting by presenting findings, solutions and next steps for improving coordination of international response to catastrophic disasters in North America with the intent that they would then be presented at the NAHRS in March 2018.

### 3. Key Topics

The NAHRS topic areas covered during the Mexico preparatory meeting were:

1. Determination of national requirements and triggers for accepting and facilitating international support
2. Cross border movement of professional response personnel and their equipment
3. Cross border movement of humanitarian supplies and tools
4. Licensure requirements for professional response personnel<sup>1</sup>
5. Migration issues related to the movement of people from one country to another due to a disaster (either due to the threat of a disaster or following the occurrence of a disaster)

Each of these topic areas were covered in-depth during the TTX. The conversations and insights from these sessions supported development of a series of challenges and solutions.

#### 3.1 Determination of National Requirements and Triggers for Requesting, Accepting and Facilitating International Support

During this session, participants were asked to use the TTX scenario to answer the following questions:

1. What are the existing triggers in place for requesting international assistance from the US and Canada? What are the challenges in applying these triggers? What solutions are there to address these challenges?
2. Should Mexico request assistance from the US and Canada in support of response and recovery efforts?
3. What types and quantities of assistance that can be mobilized from the US and Canada?
4. What are the likely challenges related to mobilizing assistance on the scale of what's needed?

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of the NAHRS Mexico Preparatory Meeting, the "licensure" topic area was grouped into Topic Area Two - Cross border movement of professional response personnel and their equipment

The scenario's effect on Mexico forced participants to consider pre-existing policies that dictate response activities and triggers for requesting international assistance, as well as what aid should be requested from which international stakeholders. Working groups agreed that the primary legal trigger for catastrophic disaster response is a declaration of national disaster from the Office of the President of the Republic. The Ministry of the Interior, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, holds the responsibility of liaising with other countries to request international aid. Initial requests for aid will typically be released through relevant embassies.

Mexico's Office of Civil Protection convenes the National Emergency Committee in case of national disasters, and has primary responsibility for coordination of domestic disaster response. Plan MX, which falls under the Mexican office of Civil Protection, is the pre-existing disaster relief protocol that coordinates all federal efforts to aid the population in case of emergencies.<sup>2</sup>

Participants across working groups agreed that there is no existing, well-functioning communication system for accepting and receiving help from international stakeholders in the case of a national emergency. Additionally, participants recognized that Mexico would likely receive a large amount of diverse support from the international community, in types and quantities that it may not have the capacity to efficiently handle.

Proposed solutions for solving coordination challenges in a catastrophic disaster context included:

- Ensuring the Ministry of Interior has a direct telephone contact with all relevant international response organizations (including USAID OFDA and UN OCHA)
- Conducting flash trainings and implementing policies that facilitate efficient donor management of spontaneous volunteers
- Using the Mexican Red Cross as a supply conduit for other NGOs and Government assistance, reducing stress on bureaucratic systems and hastening aid delivery times
- Working with Latin American neighbors to the south to take advantage of efficiencies created by language and culture

### 3.2 Cross Border Movement of Professional Response Personnel and their Equipment and Licensure Issues

As aid arrived from the US and Canada to support the Mexican response to the Popocatépetl disaster, participants had to consider strategic and operational implications of receiving aid from North American neighbors. During this session, participants were asked to use the scenario to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges likely to arise related to this incoming international assistance?
2. What are the new solutions or ways of working that could address these challenges?

Participants identified the ability of emergency response personnel to move across the border as a significant challenge to an efficient response to a catastrophic disaster in Mexico. Although few participants were aware, Mexico does have a provision in its 2012 General Guidelines that allows for expediting visas for humanitarian response personnel, defined as 'a foreign person who intends to undertake relief actions or rescue in situations of emergency or disaster in the country and is a member of any group of public, private or social character that have that object.' Representatives from the National Institute of Migration noted that there are two pre-existing areas in the Migratory Act of 2011<sup>3</sup> that would help response personnel enter Mexico more quickly in a disaster scenario:

- 1) Permit for volunteer work: personnel are limited to 180 days in Mexico and they must not be paid.

<sup>2</sup> <https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/canada/index.php/en/notices/11564-earthquake19sep2017>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.albany.edu/~rk289758/documents/Ley\\_de\\_Migracion\\_en\\_Ingles.pdf](https://www.albany.edu/~rk289758/documents/Ley_de_Migracion_en_Ingles.pdf)

- 2) Humanitarian reasons: 180 days of permit and allowed to be paid in national territory.

Even with these agreements in place, participants felt that there would be challenges related to licensing that would allow skilled responders (such as doctors and engineers) to practice in a catastrophic disaster scenario. Participants proposed creating diplomatic exceptions to allow paramedics, physicians and nurses to operate in this context.

One notable example of progress in joint North American disaster response is the MOU between Mexico and Canada that allows firefighters to help fight wildfires in Canadian provinces. While the MOU took 5 years to fully negotiate, Mexico now has the capacity to send firefighters 72 hours after a request from Canadian officials.

Proposed solutions included:

- Creating diplomatic exceptions to allow foreign paramedics, physicians and nurses to operate within the context of a catastrophic disaster
- Looking for methods and processes to optimize the humanitarian visa program
- Holding training sessions, and creating policies and more substantial plans that steer spontaneous voluntary assistance properly
- Working on a common Red Cross response system to increase interoperability amongst North American Red Cross Societies

### 3.3 Cross Border Movement of Humanitarian Supplies, Equipment, and Tools

The third TTX session challenged the Mexican stakeholders and systems involved in accepting large numbers of humanitarian supplies and equipment. The simulated supplies arrived via ground, air, and sea to stress-test the different systems involved in accepting aid in a catastrophic disaster scenario. During this session, participants were asked to use the scenario to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges likely to arise related to this incoming international supplies, equipment and tools?
2. What are the new solutions or ways of working that could address these challenges?

One of the consistent challenges emerging from the session was that approval processes regarding food, medicine, and other regulated items might impede responders' ability to meet the humanitarian need with international aid. Another challenge presented by participants was that Red Cross National Societies receiving aid supplies might not have the capacity to handle the numerous, disparate supplies entering Mexico after a catastrophic disaster.

Proposed solutions included:

- Pre-qualifying listings of equipment and supply packages across Mexico, the US and Canada to be accepted in case of a catastrophic disaster through a tri-lateral agreement.
- Creating diplomatic exceptions to allow necessary medications to enter the country and bypass commercial restrictions
- Establishing and informing donors of a standard food kit, closely aligned with the Sphere Project guidelines.
- Training personnel at receiving Red Cross National Societies to handle the supplies and tools they may expect to receive during a catastrophic disaster
- Creating pre-approved articles for insertion into Diplomatic Letters specifying potentially required humanitarian needs

### 3.4 Migration Issues Related to the Movement of People from One Country to Another Due to the Catastrophic Disaster

The final TTX session was designed to have participants consider issues concerning migration due to a catastrophic disaster. The scenario presented two situations for working groups to discuss: a medical airlift of 6,000 dialysis patients, and the mass migration of 20,000 Mexican citizens across the Mexico-US border. During this session, participants were asked to use the scenario to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges likely to arise related to this large movement of people?
2. What are the new solutions or ways of working that could address these challenges?

Two challenges identified pertaining to mass migration in a catastrophic disaster context included resistance from local populations to leave affected areas and the safety of migration routes. A few working groups recognized the importance of defining the legal status of a disaster-affected person entering the United States or Canada.

A consensus was reached across working groups that due to burdensome migration regulations, it would be better for the US and Canada to bring dialysis equipment to Mexico rather than to move people to foreign hospitals. In terms of accepting affected populations across the border, participants agreed that Mexico and the US should facilitate a legal process that would allow for a “Temporary Stay” for those citizens affected by a catastrophic disaster.

Proposed solutions included:

- Mexico and the US should facilitate a legal process that would allow for a “Temporary Stay” for those citizens affected by a catastrophic disaster

### 3.5 Other Key Topics Discussed During TTX Sessions

One of the most important themes expressed across the two days of the NAHRS Mexico preparatory meeting was that respect for human life trumps all international or national policy in a catastrophic disaster scenario. Included in this conversation were discussions about the challenges in dealing with remains. Mexican systems may not be robust enough to handle the number of deaths from a catastrophic event. Someone needs to be responsible for bringing in body bags and handling corpses.

Other topic areas covered included:

- Putting additional focus and resources into catastrophic planning, training, and policy development, utilizing the requisite catastrophic disaster planning experts
- Planning for decentralized management in the wake of a catastrophic event, when traditional centralized systems have been severely affected (or incapacitated)
- Developing catastrophic financial response mechanisms so that response entities can have the financial resources required available at all stages of the disaster preparation and response effort
- Reducing differences in response systems across North American Red Cross National Societies to increase interoperability

## 4. Key Findings and Conclusions

During the Mexico Preparatory Meeting, facilitators captured the various challenges and solution recommendations from the discussions. Participants were asked to first revise the list of challenges, then determine if they agreed or disagreed with the resulting list. The same was done with the solution recommendations. Participants then voted individually on which solution they believed to be most important recommendations to put forward to the broader NAHRS stakeholders at the NAHRS Summit Meeting in March 2018. The top results from this process are presented below.

### **Challenges**

The challenges with highest levels of agreement, in order, include:

1. More expertise is needed to understand the implications for cross-border assistance during catastrophic events
2. Border entry and customs impediments exist for North American mutual assistance
3. The scenario illuminated the need to identify aid partners from Latin America and the huge stress that a catastrophic response will have on traditional coordination functions
4. Regardless of whether the Mexican government officially requests international assistance, external governments, organizations and private individuals will respond. This presents a donations management challenge. Although the Mexican Red Cross may be able to move supplies faster than NGOs and Governments, it can still be become overwhelmed
5. Telecommunications systems are predominantly held in the private sector and are vulnerable to the impacts of a catastrophic disaster
6. There are significant challenges moving humanitarian personnel, equipment and supplies across the border
7. National level command and control may not be possible which may hinder the response
8. Limited access to funding sources in all post-disaster phases will impact recovery
9. The lack of specificity in Diplomatic Notes regarding response needs and requests will slow international response
10. While there are some similarities in response systems amongst the three North American Red Cross Societies, the differences may hinder Society to Society support in a catastrophic disaster

### **Solutions**

The recommended solutions receiving the highest numbers of votes, in order, included:

1. Development of a tri-national common protocol for the decentralization of operations management in the event of a catastrophic disaster
2. Begin the dialogue between the Red Cross National Societies and their respective governments to standardize processes and policies and establish communication protocols

3. Augment the capabilities to integrate international humanitarian assistance tools from international entities (UN OCHA, IFRC, Civil Protection,)
4. Look for methods and processes to optimize the humanitarian visa program
5. More attention is needed in planning for catastrophic events, including training and exchanges of personnel and information
6. Work on a common Red Cross response system to increase interoperability amongst the North American Red Cross National Societies
7. Develop communication channels for responders and encourage the private sector to create plans for the rapid recovery of telecommunications
8. Create preliminary lists and pre-scripted, pre-approved articles for use in Diplomatic Letters to specify the humanitarian needs
9. Develop financing mechanisms for catastrophic responses when rapid access to massive resources is needed for response and recovery
10. Develop training sessions, policies and more substantial plans to steer spontaneous voluntary assistance appropriately

Results from the NAHRS Mexico preparatory meeting will be shared with attendees of the North American Humanitarian Response Summit in Washington, DC from March 14-15, 2018.