

**OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN  
AFFAIRS**

**JOINT PROPOSAL FOR IRIN AND RELIEFWEB  
ACTIVITIES AND FUNDING IN 1999**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

In times of conflict or natural disaster, the ability of the international community to take effective and speedy action to mitigate suffering is largely dependant on fast, accurate and pertinent information from the affected area. Providing such information has become more difficult in the last decade as today's crises are invariably multi-dimensional and highly complex, resulting in an increased need for in depth understanding of issues and players. As part of its mandate to mobilise and coordinate effective responses to crises the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has sought ways of improving reporting from disaster zones so that impartial and relevant information is readily available to the wider humanitarian community.

Two of OCHA's key information tools are its Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRINs) and ReliefWeb, separate but mutually complementary and reinforcing information units. These units have adopted an innovative cross-border and inter-agency approach to information gathering and dissemination while at the same time fostering greater awareness of the interlocking and regional aspects of issues and events. By bridging the information gap, IRIN and ReliefWeb assist OCHA in fulfilling its main role and the three core functions of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. These are policy development, advocacy on humanitarian issues and the coordination of humanitarian emergency responses.

The present document reflects ongoing efforts by OCHA to establish an integrated information management system and describes the functions of the two projects, areas of cooperation, priorities and funding requirements for 1999. In this respect, IRIN requires a total of US\$ 2.67 million for its three offices in Africa for 1999. The ReliefWeb budget for its offices in New York and Geneva totals US\$ 1.14 million for the same period. It should be noted that this is the first joint appeal for the two projects, both of which depend totally on extra budgetary funds for their continuation.

## **2. IRIN IN 1998**

A non-commercial electronic mail and fax subscription service originally borne out of the crisis in the Great lakes, IRIN was established in late 1995 and now has offices in Nairobi, Johannesburg and Abidjan enabling it to provide in-depth coverage of events in east, central, south and west Africa. The IRIN updates and alerts cover a wide range of humanitarian, political, economic and social issues from a regional perspective. The added-value humanitarian information is drawn from an extensive network of UN and non-UN sources, ranging from governments, international organisations, academia, think tanks in donor and UN capitals to non-governmental organisations, missionaries, and private enterprise.

In addition to its core products of daily, weekly and special background reports on issues of concern to the humanitarian community, in 1998 IRIN produced interviews with leading humanitarian figures, in-depth country profiles, who is who of political and rebel groups, and enhanced graphics and maps to facilitate understanding of events. IRIN has continued to distribute on behalf of other humanitarian partners non-UN reports on countries covered by the three IRIN offices, as well as official UN reports and press releases from field offices and headquarters.

At the end of 1998, IRIN had a subscription base of almost 5,000 and an estimated daily readership of some 15,000 people. The primary audience is humanitarian actors within the UN and in non-governmental organisations, in the field as well as in headquarters, government officials, academics and the media.

IRIN has also played an important advocacy role by ensuring that increasing disregard for fundamental humanitarian principles, violations of humanitarian law and threats to the safety and protection of civilians and relief personnel do not go unreported even in the most remote corners of the world. Working closely with international and national NGOs, IRIN has attempted to reinforce civil society by incorporating knowledge of local sources into its reports and analysis.

All of IRIN's own materials are available in English and French. In Central and Eastern Africa a Swahili service was launched in 1998 to facilitate distribution of IRIN reports to local communities. As part of its integrated approach to information, IRIN works closely with OCHA's Field Coordination Units in both the collection, verification and dissemination of information. IRIN reports complement and enhance the country specific reporting undertaken by the respective UN field offices.

## **3. RELIEFWEB IN 1998**

Since its official launch in 1996, ReliefWeb has been acknowledged as one of the principal on-line information resources for the wider humanitarian community on global natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies, and has become a respected and well-used tool for informed decision making by the international community.

ReliefWeb supplies time-critical reporting, and posts information collected from over 300 sources, including OCHA, IRIN, other UN agencies, international organisations, governments, NGOs, academia / research institutions and the media. ReliefWeb has users in over 150 countries who access more than 300,000 documents each month. Complex emergencies and natural disasters are monitored daily and as of the end of 1998, the site contained information on over 600 archived natural disasters providing response data as far back as 1981.

Unlike other disaster information websites, ReliefWeb continues its monitoring after the disaster has disappeared from the mainstream media. Additionally, as the media devotes less time and space to coverage of international crises and disasters, ReliefWeb is becoming an increasingly valuable resource and repository for this information.

In order to better serve the information needs of the wider humanitarian community, in 1998 ReliefWeb expanded its map centre, and Financial tracking data base for tracking donor contributions to UN Consolidated Appeals. New features include a directory of humanitarian organisations, humanitarian employment bulletin board and an on-line discussion forum. An advanced search engine has been developed to enable the user to quickly retrieve specific information. A breaking news feature provides the capacity for remote publication and up to the minute news and alerts as new emergencies / disasters struck.

The ReliefWeb New York team is responsible for overall management and coordination of the project and serves as a focal point for information providers based in North and South America. A Geographical Information Systems (GIS) specialist based in New York was hired in 1998 and is improving ReliefWeb's online Map Centre, providing more reference maps displaying humanitarian information such as location and movement of displaced persons.

The ReliefWeb antenna in Geneva serves as the liaison with OCHA Geneva and other UN agencies, NGOs and governments in Europe and Africa, and provides the continual updates on the ReliefWeb sites during working hours in Central Europe. Together, the two ReliefWeb Offices provide time-critical coverage of global emergencies from 0800 to 2400 hours GMT.

#### 4. IRIN/RELIEFWEB - THE WAY FORWARD

Under the 1998 reorganisation of OCHA, ReliefWeb and IRIN were brought under the centralised management of the newly created Policy, Analysis and Information Division (PAID), based in New York. As part of an overall strategy of integrating its information services, OCHA plans to bring ReliefWeb and IRIN even closer together in 1999. The move is intended to build on the success of both units while at the same time maintaining their separate identities, maximising resources, reducing costs and improving the efficiency and usefulness of OCHA's Information services to the wider humanitarian community.

To retain the uniqueness of IRIN and respond to increasing demands from the donor community, it is planned to create an IRIN website to complement its current e-mail and fax delivery service. This website will be placed within the existing ReliefWeb framework to allow both units to share many new features, such as enhanced maps, graphics and access to archival material. This link-up is, in part, intended to help both units carry out two other increasingly important functions - those of "information sifter" and "institutional memory" provider.

IRIN and ReliefWeb will continue to free subscribers from the pain and hassle of information overload by collating and sifting the myriad and increasing number of raw sources, by authenticating and verifying the contents, and by researching and summarising approved material before presenting it to clients in a concise and digestible form. Ready access to the full reports for those who require and can handle more data will still be possible.

In order to further improve its products, IRIN will also launch the following new services in 1999:

- **filtered news.** E-mail / fax subscribers will be able to choose specific countries or subjects from the total range of IRIN geographical and thematic coverage. For example, it will be possible to request information related to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Liberia and Cholera only, or other multiples of countries and / or issues from the complete IRIN menu. This filter service will enable the IRINs to ensure that individual reports contain more humanitarian and contextual information than is currently possible in the present format. The weekly round-ups will continue to be produced on a regional basis providing the regional perspective and a short overview of the main events. Filtered news will also be available on the IRIN / ReliefWeb website;

- **more early warning, analysis and special features.** The IRINs will work closely with OCHA country teams to produce background features and reports on specific problems, needs or success stories. The IRINs will also produce more features / reports to facilitate OCHA's advocacy and early-warning role by focusing attention on issues of special concern to the humanitarian community;

As the World Wide Web continues to grow, develop technical sophistication, and become accessible in more and more countries, ReliefWeb will be enhanced as follows using feedback from the 1998 user survey:

- **web via E-mail:** This service will enable users to select certain areas of interest (countries, issues, subjects, sectors) and have documents that contain this metadata sent to their E-mail boxes automatically. Updates via E-mail will also be available for field personnel who may not have regular Internet access. This feature is an example of "push technology" which disseminates targeted information according to specific user profiles. In Africa, ReliefWeb will work closely with IRIN on this service;

**synthesised information:** The ReliefWeb team will extract information from narrative reports and represent this information and data in tabular or graphic form (pie charts, bar graphs and image maps). This will allow the user to easily access and analyse important core data (i.e. latest affected population numbers, location of humanitarian organisations) and reduce the need to search for and collect this information from a variety of documents. The Financial Tracking System is an example of this type of synthesised information in data base format;

**mirror Sites:** In addition to strengthening its main server capacity, ReliefWeb will establish a mirror site in an appropriate location to ensure access reliability and act as a backup system to its main site;

## 5. FUNDING / COST PLAN

Ways of raising revenue from the respective IRIN and ReliefWeb products and services are still being explored, including the possibility of funding from the private sector. In the shorter term, however, traditional donors remain the major funding source for both projects.

It should be noted that the cost plan for IRIN includes support and maintenance costs for the three IRIN offices in Africa, which are in Nairobi, Abidjan and Johannesburg. Geographical coverage of these offices remains the same as in 1998. Plans for the launch of IRIN – Caucasus, Central Asia and Southern Balkans have been on hold due to lack of funds. As demands for IRIN services in these regions continue to be voiced by UN agencies, NGOs, and donor governments, the project has recently been submitted to the donor community for consideration. Likewise, ReliefWeb foresees establishing an antenna in Asia, giving it around-the-clock coverage and linkages to Asia. Separate project proposals for IRIN and ReliefWeb are available from OCHA.

Annex I contains the financial summary for 1999 for IRIN, and Annex II for ReliefWeb.

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