

Ministerialrat Michael Niemeier

Speech: “Strengthening Disaster Preparedness: a German approach”

**Conference of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the
Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center (CIDS)**

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Dr Osma,
Dr Jacobs,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung and the Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center for inviting me to this conference. I was glad to accept their invitation in order to present to you today a few aspects of Germany's strategy for strengthening disaster preparedness.

[A changed threat situation and new challenges]

Since the end of the Cold War, the threats in Germany have changed. We are no longer primarily concerned with preventing a classic military conflict; now we also have to plan for "asymmetric threat situations", in which the potential for violence by non-state actors is almost impossible to calculate, and for the highly networked nature of different areas of infrastructure. In addition to these threats, the risks, dangers and damage caused by natural disasters have been increasing for years and will likely continue to do so. Any reassessment of the situation must be based on these current threats. In this situation, the important thing is effective crisis management which is able to optimize the deployment of a variety of resources, national as well as international, if necessary. For as

the French microbiologist Louis Pasteur once said, “Chance favours only the prepared.”

[Because of the increased global threat posed by international terrorism, disaster preparedness must focus in particular on managing the consequences of possible attacks.

Also when it comes to natural disasters, highly regarded international institutions predict a variety of climate changes related to global warming; because of their impacts on civil protection, these changes will bring new challenges, above all changes in the distribution of precipitation and more frequent incidence of extreme weather. Increasing snowfall leads to serious flood warnings. Extreme drought, especially in the southern EU Member States, results in a higher danger of forest fires. I am sure we can all remember the shocking and devastating forest fires in the summer of 2007.]

Disaster preparedness in Germany must adapt to the changing threats in Europe and around the world.

[Organization of disaster preparedness in Germany]

No matter how well disaster preparedness is coordinated at the central government level, nothing can replace effective disaster preparedness in the field. One has to prepare for disasters where they occur. This is one reason why civil protection in

Germany is not centralized, but involves a variety of governmental and non-governmental actors. The former include the federal, state and local governments.

Under the federal system set out in our Constitution, known as the Basic Law, Germany's sixteen states (*Länder*) are responsible for general threat prevention, and thus also for disaster preparedness. They are to make sure that the necessary personnel and material resources are available. They are responsible for operational crisis management, also in case of disasters and accidents affecting the territory of more than one state. Germany's Federal Government has rather limited authority in the field of civil protection; according to the Constitution, it is responsible only for protecting the civilian population against threats caused by war. In this case, civil protection (or civil defence) is one aspect of national defence, auxiliary to the military's job of defending the country.

This leads in general to two independent areas of law and administration:

- Emergency planning in peacetime - the competence of the states (*Länder*).
- Emergency planning in case of war - federal responsibility.

What agencies and organizations are there at federal level?
How have they adapted to the changed threat situation?

Within the Federal Government, the **Federal Ministry of the Interior** and thus the Federal Minister of the Interior are solely responsible for civil protection issues. The ministry has a separate directorate-general devoted to civil protection and crisis management. The ministry oversees two agencies for operational efforts: the **Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance** (BBK), which is responsible for analysis and coordination; and the operational unit, the **Federal Agency for Technical Relief** (THW). Both agencies have their headquarters in Bonn, the former German capital.

You might ask now why there are two existing agencies due to the fact that the federal level is only responsible in wartime, as I explained earlier. That is true, but all activities on the federal level (including the distribution of operational means to the *Länder*, which are paid for by the federal level) have a dual use: preparation for and supervision in wartime and assistance to the *Länder* in peacetime (= dual use).

Without changing laws concerning the traditional allocation of competencies, the Federal Government increased its coordination of services with the states by setting up the new Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance

(Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe, BBK) in May 2004. The Office's mission is to perform the German government's civil protection tasks, for example by providing support for the states by analysing the situation and distributing the relevant information. **(Number of employees: 292, 2008 budget: 101.4 million euros)**

Part of this analysis and coordination function is handled by the **German Joint Information and Situation Centre (GMLZ)**, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week (24/7). It constantly monitors and assesses the civil security situation at national and international level. But the centre's primary role is to coordinate the deployment of workers and record and distribute material relief ranging from technical equipment to sandbags.

The GMLZ mainly relies on the **German Emergency Preparedness Information System**, or **deNIS** for short. The core task of this new database is to link, prepare and provide information needed to manage large-scale disasters.

After the BBK, the **Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW)** is the second component of the federal strategy for civil protection.

This federal agency, founded in 1950, is a unique and highly effective organization for providing direct disaster relief at home and abroad. In addition to its 800 full-time staff, this agency can call on 80,000 volunteers nation-wide – including a large number of technicians, engineers, logistical experts and other specialists. Volunteers make up an impressive 90% of the THW's membership. With its core competence in rescue operations, lighting and rebuilding infrastructure, the Federal Agency for Technical Relief is a major actor in the overall system of civil protection and disaster preparedness. (**Budget for 2008: 135 million euros**; nation-wide, THW takes part in an average of **15,000 missions every year**, involving over **40,000 volunteers** with more than 1.2 million duty hours.)

Germany has a very effective system of disaster assistance, thanks in particular to the high proportion of volunteers. Within this system, the federal level and the states, which have primary responsibility, work closely and effectively with aid organizations and fire brigades in the states. Especially characteristic for Germany's system of disaster preparedness is that its backbone is made up of volunteers. More than 1.2 million citizens are active in volunteer fire brigades – no other country can demonstrate a similar breadth of volunteer commitment. This system is rounded out by five volunteer organizations, including the German Red Cross, with another half-million volunteer helpers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The changed threat situation overall has created new challenges for our proven system of civil protection. To meet these challenges efficiently, already in 2002 the federal and state governments agreed on a new strategy for protecting the population of Germany.

The current Federal Government too has committed itself to taking on a greater role in managing and coordinating in the event of major disasters. Such overall coordination, which a single state alone is hardly able to manage, is needed especially when disasters affect more than one state or are of national significance. This is why the federal and state governments recently agreed to allow central coordination at federal level when requested by one or more states. (However: The states' - i.e. *Länder* - responsibility for operational crisis management remains unaffected!)

Please allow me now to mention a few aspects of European and international cooperation which lie within the responsibility of the federal level.

[European cooperation and cooperation with third countries]

Cooperation within the European Union and cooperation with our partners in third countries are especially important for Germany.

In order to sufficiently protect their people from cross-border disasters and their impact, in future the European member states must work together more closely and coordinate their efforts better. Germany is willing to do its part to improve cooperation and coordination at the European level. But German policy continues to be guided by the principle that the EU may support assistance measures, but decisions concerning the availability and deployment of national resources must remain with the member states. The principle of subsidiarity also applies to civil protection.

Germany is open to changes in the EU's civil protection when they add concrete and visible value. We support improving networks by relying on national capacities, but we do not want structures to be duplicated. We support national rapid response modules for providing assistance, but not a permanent EU disaster management force; and we support joint training and exercises, as in the German proposal to establish a network of disaster management academies.

We want to improve our cooperation not only with the European Union, however, but also with our neighbours. In this context, I would like to mention the Union for the Mediterranean. The Federal Government has never questioned the importance of the Mediterranean region as a direct neighbour of the European Union. Disaster preparedness is thus quite rightly one of the priorities of the Union for the Mediterranean. Germany will take an active part in the discussion of how to implement this priority.

The EU and the Mediterranean countries can share important experience and better coordinate their operational equipment, as well as conduct joint basic and advanced training.

Here I would like to mention just two German initiatives: With regard to preparation and prevention, Germany will propose joint development of a tsunami early warning system for the Mediterranean. And with regard to advanced training, we recently proposed at EU level a network of disaster management academies which also calls for cooperation with our partners in the Union for the Mediterranean.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the field of disaster preparedness, we need to increase our efforts world-wide on behalf of prevention. Expenditure on

prevention is only a tiny fraction of the costs of dealing with the damage and rebuilding after a disaster. If, with the help of preventive measures, we are able to prevent disasters or reduce their frequency, this will benefit public security and well-being far more than any spectacular rescue operations after a disaster occurs.

Thank you for your attention!