Submission No 10

Watching Brief on the War on Terrorism

Organisation: **Australian Red Cross NT Division**
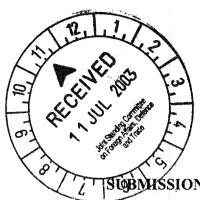
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SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

BY

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS NORTHERN TERRITORY DIVISION

The primary role of the Australian Red Cross under the NT Counter Disaster Plan is the operation of the National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS) after a major emergency or disaster. NRIS is a national computer database system for the registration of persons displaced or evacuated from areas of emergency or disaster. It aims to ensure that all displaced persons can be accounted for, their whereabouts monitored and that information authorized for release is made available in a timely, sensitive and accurate manner. The NRIS system is controlled by Emergency Management Australia (EMA) and the national computer database is operated by Department of Health & Ageing in Canberra. It may be activated on a local state and territory basis, or nationwide.

In the Territory, the operation of NRIS is a joint responsibility of the NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services and Australian Red Cross NT Division under a MOU agreed in 1999. The NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services provide the NRIS computer centre and equipment. Police normally carry out on scene registration of affected persons but Red Cross maintains the capability to do so in certain circumstances, such as occurred with the evacuation of injured personnel from Bali. The telephone inquiry centre is manned by police or the Red Cross as appropriate to the prevailing circumstances.

The NT Division of Australian Red Cross manages the staffing of the NRIS centre and has responsibility for the input of registration details onto database. Red Cross prepares and maintains a pool of trained NRIS team leaders, data operators and personnel to staff an NRIS telephone inquiry service. A mix of paid staff and volunteers is utilized in this role. In addition, a network is maintained of personnel capable of being trained and mobilized at short notice. Red Cross also maintains the capacity to operate a centralized telephone service that receives both offers of general assistance and requests for help from members of the public. During the medical evacuations after the Bali bombing this service was partially activated for the provision of accommodation to the families of victims who had flown to Darwin.

All state and territory divisions of the Australian Red Cross are capable of providing backup support in the operation of NRIS in the event that one area becomes overloaded or inoperable. This occurred after the recent ACT bushfires when the system was operated remotely from the Victorian Division because of a power failure. The

Australian Red Cross has a national Disaster Response Plan that provides for a sharing of such resources.

In addition to its obligations under the MOU with the Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Red Cross has developed the capability to transmit NRIS data via the Internet, mobile telephone, HF radio and satellite telephone. A local registration and enquiry system using portable computers has also been developed by the Red Cross and is capable of operation in the event that the NRIS computing system becomes unavailable.

Red Cross also has the capability to activate a range of volunteers relatively quickly, especially for the provision of personnel support, using local resources and those available from the Australian Red Cross Society throughout the country.

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