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European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

EU Civil Protection Mechanism

What is it?

In October 2001, the European Commission established the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. The Mechanism aims to strengthen cooperation between the EU countries and 8 participating states on civil protection to improve prevention, preparedness, and response to disasters.

When an emergency overwhelms the response capabilities of a country in Europe and beyond, it can request assistance through the Mechanism. The Commission plays a key role in coordinating the disaster response worldwide, contributing to at least 75% of the transport and/or operational costs of deployments.

Why is this important?

Disasters know no borders and can simultaneously hit one or several countries without warning. Having a well-coordinated joint response means that when national authorities are overwhelmed, they have one point of contact rather than multiple to deal with.

A joint approach further helps pool expertise and capacities of first responders, avoids duplication of relief efforts, and ensures that assistance meets the needs of those affected. Pooling together civil protection capacities and capabilities allows for a stronger and more coherent collective response.

In addition to the EU countries, there are currently 8 participating states in the Mechanism (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Türkiye). Since its inception in 2001, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism has responded to over 600 requests for assistance inside and outside the EU.

The Mechanism also helps coordinate disaster preparedness and prevention activities of national authorities and contributes to the exchange of best practices. This facilitates the continuous development of higher common standards enabling teams to understand different approaches better and work interchangeably when a disaster strikes.

How are we helping?

Following a request for assistance through the Mechanism, the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) mobilises assistance or expertise.

The ERCC monitors events around the globe 24/7 and ensures rapid deployment of emergency support through a direct link with national civil protection authorities. Specialised teams and equipment, such as forest firefighting planes, search and rescue and medical teams can be mobilised at short notice for deployments inside and outside Europe.

Satellite maps produced by the Copernicus Emergency Management Service also support civil protection operations. Copernicus provides timely and precise geospatial information that is useful to delineate affected areas and plan disaster relief operations.

In developing countries, civil protection assistance typically goes hand in hand with EU humanitarian aid. Experts in both fields work closely together to ensure the most coherent analysis and response, particularly in response to complex emergencies.

The Mechanism also intervenes in marine pollution emergencies: the Centre can quickly mobilise oil recovery capacity and expertise from the participating states and European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA).

EU civil protection in action

Any country in the world, but also the United Nations and its agencies or a relevant international organisation, can call on the EU Civil Protection Mechanism for help. In 2021, the Mechanism was activated 114 times.

For example, to respond to (i) COVID-19 in Europe and worldwide; (ii) floods in Belgium; (iii) forest fires in the Mediterranean, the Western Balkans and Austria; (iv) repatriations from Afghanistan, and (v) the earthquake and a hurricane in Haiti.

The war in Ukraine has triggered the largest emergency operation since the creation of the Mechanism.

A strong EU response in times of crisis

In response to a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Ukraine, all 27 EU countries, plus Norway, Türkiye and North Macedonia, have offered help to Ukraine via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. The assistance includes millions of items such as first aid kits, shelter equipment, firefighting equipment, water pumps, power generators, and fuel.

The coordination represents the largest ever activation of the Mechanism to date. It helps assist people in Ukraine and those who have fled to neighbouring countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Moldova.

The EU is also coordinating medical evacuations of Ukrainian patients in need of urgent care to hospitals across Europe via the Mechanism.

To efficiently manage an exceptionally high number of deliveries, logistical hubs have been set up in Poland, Romania and Slovakia with the support of the ERCC. These hubs gather the assistance offered by EU countries and dispatch it to Ukraine.

As an additional asset to the Mechanism, the EU established a European reserve of additional capacities (the 'rescEU reserve').

The rescEU reserve includes a fleet of firefighting planes and helicopters, and a medical evacuation plane, as well as a stockpile of medical equipment and field hospitals that can respond to health emergencies.

The EU is currently developing capabilities to respond to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear incidents.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has distributed millions of protective masks, medical gloves and ventilators coming from strategic rescEU distribution centres currently hosted by 9 EU Member States to European countries in need.

To ensure a better response to future challenges, a new legislation on EU Civil Protection – in force as of May 2021 – gives the EU additional capacities to respond to new risks in Europe and the world and boosts the rescEU reserve.

European Civil Protection Pool

EU Member States and participating states may commit national resources for emergency response to the European Civil Protection Pool (ECP).

This pool allows for better planning and coordination of response activities at European and national levels which means a faster and reliable EU response to disasters. The Pool constitutes the backbone of the Mechanism.

Prevention and preparedness

Prevention and preparedness activities mitigate the effects of disasters. A training programme for civil protection experts from EU Member States and participating states ensures compatibility and complementarity between intervention teams, while large-scale exercises train capacities for specific disasters each year.

The EU supports and complements prevention and preparedness efforts of its Member States and participating states by focusing on areas where a joint European approach is more effective than separate national actions.

These include risk assessments to identify the disaster risks across the EU, encouraging research to promote disaster resilience and reinforcing early warning tools.

Facts & figures

Since 2001, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism has been activated **more than 600 times** to respond to emergencies.

The Mechanism pools response capacities from **all EU countries and 8 participating states**.

The Mechanism can be **deployed inside the EU and around the world**.

Joint disaster prevention and preparedness actions.

In response to the **war in Ukraine**, the EU has started its **largest emergency operation** since the creation of the Mechanism, and channels millions of emergency items to Ukraine and the region.

