

## Responding to the worst of Mother Nature

Abdul Haq Amiri led the team to organise the humanitarian response following the 2003 earthquake that devastated Bam, Iran. **In 2004 he managed an emergency mission to deal with the aftermath of Bangladesh's floods.** He's in the Emirates preparing his team in case disaster should strike.

**A**lthough we live in the relative security of the Emirates, the Bam earthquake of 2003, Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and the following year's devastating Kashmir earthquake all demonstrate it is hard to predict what Mother Nature has in store for us. Seasoned United Nations officer Abdul Haq Amiri was appointed last month to run the region's disaster management efforts from Dubai. Emirates Business learns about his plans for the new role.

—Many people are confused by the function of UN agencies. What does the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Ocha) do and what is your role within it?

—There are many different groups and organisations that respond to disasters and emergencies – governments, United Nations agencies, NGOs, Red Crescent and Cross Societies, the list goes on. Ocha's mission is to ensure all of these different actors are better co-ordinated, so we are more effective in our efforts to alleviate suffering.

My role is to advocate enhanced capacities to prepare for and respond to disasters. If this is to be successful, it must be done in partnership with governments, humanitarian organisations and the private sector across the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia region.

—So what happens to the UAE Ocha team when a natural disaster strikes in a nearby country?

—The Ocha regional office in Dubai is the first point of contact in responding to emergencies. The team is always on standby to be deployed to an emergency situation as and when needed. Several staff are trained as part of the UN Disaster Assessment and Co-ordination (Undac) team, which can deploy within six hours

### Abdul Haq Amiri

*Head of the regional UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs*

Amiri has helped save the lives of flood victims, dealt with volcanic eruptions and rebuilt communities devastated by earthquakes. And if that doesn't already make you feel a little inadequate, the 42-year-old also speaks fluent Farsi, English, Urdu and Pashto, as well as having a grasp of Arabic and Russian.

The married father of four hails from Baharak, Afghanistan, and has notched up various degrees in economics from Pakistani and US universities. He has worked for the UN in humanitarian roles across Asia and Africa.

When he is not out saving lives, Amiri studies disaster management and team leading as well as writing essays and books on hyperinflation, refugees, women and children in his native Afghanistan.



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after a disaster has struck. Once on the ground, we support the governments and UN country teams; we establish co-ordination mechanisms, conduct initial assessments and provide an information and mapping centre, which collects, collates and disseminates information with our partners.

—Jan Egeland, former Ocha boss, was always keen to involve the UAE and other Gulf nations in Ocha's activities. Why do you think they have hitherto been reluctant to provide humanitarian relief through the UN?

—Gulf nations have always been big givers, but humility and a sense of religious obligation often make Muslims reluctant to record or advertise their donations. However, I think there is an increasing awareness and willingness in the region to use multilateral channels to provide humanitarian response.

—The UAE has been busy branding itself as a "humanitarian hub" with a free zone called International Humanitarian City in Dubai. In your opinion, what steps need to be taken to realise this ambition?

—Dubai is well on its way to realising this ambition. International Humanitarian City has attracted a number of UN agencies that wish to take advantage of Dubai's strategic location, especially with regards to logistics and procurement. To build on this success, it is also important humanitarian agencies are given special attention and access to services. This

would enhance their ability to respond to emergencies.

—When was the last time you visited Afghanistan? Does it pain you to see the humanitarian suffering being endured by your own people?

—I visit my family in Afghanistan frequently – the last time was this July. I also worked there for a humanitarian operation from 1994 to 1995. These were extremely difficult years for the people there. It is painful to see such a great nation enduring three decades of hostilities in addition to natural disasters. Although the humanitarian situation has improved to some degree over the past few years, there are millions of people who continue to suffer.

—Do you believe Gulf nations can play a bigger role in helping the situation in Afghanistan. What would you like them to do?

—Afghanistan, as a Muslim nation, shares history and culture with Gulf nations. The Gulf has always had a major role in helping Afghans through difficult times, and I am sure they will continue to do so. I would encourage the Gulf nations to think beyond relief assistance and try to actively participate in the recovery and reconstruction projects, which would create jobs and bring stability. I would also encourage them to help enhance capacities to prepare for and respond to disasters.