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 Member States and 6 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 European 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 hit one or several countries simultaneously 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 to pool expertise and capacities of first responders, avoids duplication of relief efforts, and ensures that assistance meets the needs of those affected.

By pooling together civil protection capacities and capabilities, it allows for a stronger and more coherent collective response. In addition to the EU Member States, there are currently 6 Participating States to the Mechanism (Iceland, Norway, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Turkey). Since its inception in 2001, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism has responded to over 420 requests for assistance inside and outside the EU.

The Mechanism also helps to 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 better understand different approaches 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 2020, the Mechanism was activated more than 100 times. For example, to respond to the coronavirus pandemic; the explosion in Beirut in Lebanon; floods in Ukraine, Niger and Sudan; the earthquake in Croatia; and tropical cyclones in Latin America and Asia.

A strong EU response in times of crisis

As an additional asset to the Mechanism, the EU established a European reserve of additional capacities (the ‘rescEU reserve’). The reserve includes firefighting planes and helicopters, medical equipment, medical evacuation capacities and a medical team trained for setting up a field hospital. During COVID-19, the EU has distributed tens of thousands of protective masks, medical gloves and 30 ventilators coming from strategic rescEU distribution centres currently hosted by 9 EU Member States to 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 (ECPP). 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.