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## Getting Ready for the Next Haiti

### Interview With Advocate of "Red Helmets Brigade"

By Anita S. Bourdin

PARIS, MARCH 19, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The idea of forming an international civil protection corps to respond to natural disasters is gaining support, and recently got backing from an article in L'Osservatore Romano.

Such a brigade -- under the auspices of the United Nations -- would be led by engineers, logisticians, and other types of professionals who could coordinate the humanitarian response to natural disasters, and thus avoid the long delays that sometimes hamper aid relief.

Nicole Guedj, president of the Red Helmets Foundation, is author of a recent manifesto titled "For Red Helmets in the U.N." The foundation is working so that a red helmets brigade will be established by the United Nations, but it is also already at work providing humanitarian assistance. For example, its first project is a telecommunications carrier -- a mobile satellite unit that can be set up in a disaster region that has lost communication services (internet and phone, radio, etc.).

ZENIT spoke with Guedj about her vision for these red helmeted relief workers from the U.N..

ZENIT: You were a minister and at present are president of the Red Helmets Foundation. The recent events in Haiti have made especially clear the need to have international "civil protection." Is this what you have been defending at the United Nations for 10 years?

Guedj: Indeed, I have defended for years the creation of an international, rapid reaction, humanitarian force under the auspices of the U.N.: the Red Helmets.

The humanitarian community is not sufficiently strong to address alone the challenges of climate change.

Natural catastrophes do not cease to multiply and the victims are increasingly numerous.

We must give humanitarian assistance an "orchestra director" to coordinate its actions and to make them more efficient.

If we have not learned the lessons of the tsunami or Katrina, I hope we will retain those of Haiti.

Despite the unprecedented mobilization of international aid, it must be said that, because of lack of organization and coordination, we have lost too many human lives.

ZENIT: However, rescue teams arrived in the thousands. How do you explain the organizational problems of the emergency services?

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Guedj: Haitian President Rene Preval, with whom I signed an "Appeal for Red Helmets in the U.N.," explained it very well. Haiti was not prepared to receive such mobilization. We must anticipate the management of catastrophes to be prepared to react in the case of an emergency.

With the Red Helmets I defend, we would have a general staff, through the United Nations, to identify the needs and share the growing available resources.

I also imagine regional centers in every continent to write the master plans for intervention, to harmonize the procedures.

And in a situation of emergency, a contributory work force would be sent to evaluate the situation and coordinate the emergency teams. This is precisely what was lacking in Haiti.

ZENIT: In a recent editorial, L'Osservatore Romano points out that in the first place in the case of emergency the international rescue services would have to be mobilized and coordinated: This would avoid a certain disorder which makes for losing precious time. Would this not also establish an international law for "humanitarian intervention," as John Paul II desired, without the risk of one country dominating another?

Guedj: I am convinced that only the United Nations has the legitimacy to intervene for everything and for all, on behalf of the whole of humanity. Let's take the example of Cyclone Nargis that devastated Myanmar in 2008.

The Myanmar junta did not accept the entry of humanitarian teams until three weeks after [the disaster]. And the only interlocutor whose legitimacy and credibility it recognized was Ban Ki Moon, the U.N. secretary general.

With the Red Helmets, a new way of humanitarian governance would have to be established, based on charity work.

Later on, the member countries of the United Nations would be invited to sign a resolution and, in case of a catastrophe, it would be up to the governments to request the intervention of the Red Helmets.

Also in Chile, three days after floods, Michele Bachelet finally appealed for international aid.

ZENIT: We've seen the inequality of "opportunities" in face of an earthquake: Chile, severely hit but with limited damage, and Haiti, which lost everything. This solution seems to go also in the direction of the "universal common good," by putting in common both the techniques of prevention as well as of intervention.

Guedj: I am a militant of human rights and I declare myself tireless in wishing to guarantee the right to security for all citizens of the world.

Obviously we don't all have the same means to rescue the victims. The earthquake in Japan did not have the same consequences as the quake in Haiti!

The U.N. must assume its "responsibility to protect," intervening in all the first crucial hours of a catastrophe.

We know well that in emergency is where we can hope to save lives. Afterward, the teams are busier counting the victims.

ZENIT: Why is there such resistance? Is it simply a financial question? And which members of the U.N. are the most recalcitrant about putting into practice a permanent international corps of this type?

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Guedj: Haiti has been a catastrophe. Today, the whole world agrees in saying that international aid must be regulated and organized in situations of natural catastrophes. In Haiti, we have been able to count on the Americans who, fortunately, have carried out the function of the Red Helmets coordinating humanitarian action.

However, I repeat, we need a 100%, totally neutral, humanitarian force.

As the Vatican has said, there should be a real "political will" for the Red Helmets to be taken to the platform of the U.N. General Assembly.

No point of the planet is immune to catastrophe. We will no longer be forgiven for not being able to address it.

ZENIT: What progress has been made in this connection?

Guedj: In 2004, after the tsunami, Kofi Annan accepted the principle of the Red Helmets. From Haiti, President Preval, but also the Vatican has joined us in this struggle.

Every day we receive numerous messages from firemen, associations, etc. that are already ready to don the red helmet!

I also work with the secretary-general of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, Abdou Diouf, who is also our sponsor to involve the French-speaking countries in this project and, more especially, Africa.

In his turn, Cardinal [Jean-Marie] Lustiger, whom I remember with devotion, also supported the Red Helmets and agreed to sponsor my foundation.

Let it be recalled, if it is necessary, that Christian charity is what inspires the basis of humanitarian action and that is why it is natural that Cardinal Lustiger committed himself to its renewal.

For my part, I have always let myself be guided by this phrase of the Talmud: "To save a life is to save the whole of humanity."

ZENIT: Your project seems especially appropriate to reach young people who so wish to carry out a concrete service for others and to do so in the international realm, at the service of the global village. What do you propose today to young people?

Guedj: The Red Helmets Foundation over which I preside works very closely with the student community. When we tried out our telecommunications container Emergesat, in Chad, with the ACNUR, we were a delegation of presidents of humanitarian associations from grand écoles.

Thus these young people had the exceptional opportunity of going to meet refugees of Darfur and humanitarian personnel.

Today, they help us tirelessly to carry forward the Red Helmets project.

We also organize every year a student course of humanitarian creativity. Last year we had more than 150 enrolled from all parts of France. The projects were especially innovative and we chose a project of saline water purification through solar distillation.

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This year, we repeated the experience proposing to all the European students that they get involved in a concrete way in projects of international solidarity.

ZENIT: What other projects are you planning?

Guedj: The Red Helmets Foundation also works in the conception of innovative technological tools to facilitate humanitarian action. We have already carried out the Emergesat, our container of telecommunications by satellite, in collaboration with Thales Alenia Space and the National Center of Space Studies.

This container was sent in the first French plane that left for Port-au-Prince. At present, it is being used by the whole of the French teams present in the residence of the ambassador of France, and more than 20,000 communications have already been established.

We have also developed a search engine to find victims of natural catastrophes.

This project was chosen in Apple's "innovative Web" convocation launched by the French government and we did it with Google and some beginning franchises.

We have many other projects under way. It is up to us to make them concrete.

[Translation by ZENIT]

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On the Net:

Red Helmets Foundation:

[www.casques-rouges.org/en/fondation?SESS6d2a1194a92217a7618bb6c74a856866=8f9668a2af10378f11ae1353ff90](http://www.casques-rouges.org/en/fondation?SESS6d2a1194a92217a7618bb6c74a856866=8f9668a2af10378f11ae1353ff90)

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