



## The Disaster Law Programme and the COVID-19 response in Asia Pacific

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for all emergency response and preparedness efforts, whether it be for natural hazards, including those that are climate-induced, or public health emergencies, to be underpinned by clear laws and regulations.

This unfolding situation also exemplifies the importance of strengthening and aligning coordination, complementarity, and where possible integration between climate, disaster risk management and health systems in response to COVID-19, at both national and regional levels.

In Asia Pacific, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Disaster Law Programme is providing legal advice and assistance to National Societies and governments as they contend with the legal and humanitarian implications of the pandemic.

On the ground, Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are working with their governments, in their mandated roles, to help prevent transmission of the virus, to help communities already affected by the outbreak to maintain access to essential social services, and reduce the economic, social and psychological impact on people. And as the next disaster does not wait for the pandemic to end, Red Cross Societies are responding to disasters within the context of the virus, which for disaster law shows the further importance of laws that recognise multi-hazard events.

### The Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) established the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C), under the Biketawa Declaration, to ensure humanitarian and medical personnel and supplies can efficiently reach member countries, whilst borders in the region remain closed.

While the PHP-C was urgently developed to respond to the pandemic, the concept is not new, IFRC has provided leadership, advocacy and research for a formalised Pacific regional disaster response mechanism like the PHP-C since 2012 and a paper in 2016, Regional Mechanisms for Disaster Response, was prioritised by PIFS as an issue for the Pacific.

The PHP-C is an example of regional and global solidarity backed by political will, strong leadership, and clear 'rules of the road' – disaster law. It delivers an innovative regional model for countries to provide humanitarian support to each other in these unprecedented times. The PHP-C has already assisted with the movement of PPE and the repatriation of citizens and will be available to member countries on request.

Looking ahead, the PHP-C will help to inform the Regional Strategic Roadmap for Emergency Management (SREM), led by the Pacific Islands Emergency Management Project and PIFS, with IFRC part of the working group.

## Disaster Law Programme COVID\_19 Response in Asia Pacific

The Disaster Law Programme has been responding since the onset of the pandemic to varied needs across the region, namely assisting National Societies with information and advice on the impact of travel restrictions, incoming humanitarian assistance and aid supplies, and the role of National Societies given their legal auxiliary status.

With borders closed and delays in logistics for urgent humanitarian supplies, IFRC Disaster Law advisors have been supporting advocacy efforts with governments to reduce regulatory bottlenecks, for the importation and exportation of PPE and other essential humanitarian supplies, to enable this critical assistance to reach frontline responders and affected communities across the region. Specific advice and assistance has been provided to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. In the Philippines, COVID-19 legislation identifies Philippine Red Cross as a critical partner of the government in the distribution of goods and services to prevent and respond to the effects of the pandemic.

Due to the new and developing nature of the pandemic, there has been a lack of clarity on the governing rules, with many laws and regulations issued successively as they applied to humanitarian work in COVID-19, therefore having at hand legal advice from the Disaster Law team was essential.



During Vanuatu Red Cross' Cyclone Harold operations, it was vital that response teams followed COVID-19 protection and hygiene behaviours, as well as continuing to promote these same measures to communities. The Red Cross Emergency Response Team was trained and briefed before heading out into communities.

### The Law and Public Health in Emergencies Project

IFRC is embarking on a research project to provide guidance on best practice for domestic laws relating to health emergencies. The research will be focused on how to strengthen law and policy for public health emergencies and how to ensure synergy with other domestic law. Eighteen countries have been chosen from Asia Pacific; consideration will be given to mechanism like the PHP-C to help capture learnings to inform longer-term governance arrangements.

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