Discussion Paper: Future Direction of INSARAG following the Türkiye and Syria Earthquakes

Executive Summary

Target Audience: OCHA Leadership, Heads of UN Regional and Country Offices, INSARAG Global and Regional network members, INSARAG Working Group Co-Chairs.

Key Proposals:

1. *Raise the organizational awareness of Emergency Response Section (ERS) tools and services, particularly those of UNDAC, INSARAG and the JEU, with OCHA colleagues from regional and country offices, and particularly offices based in disaster prone countries and regions.*
2. *Regional and country offices offer ERS tools and services in their engagements with governments and RCOs - workshops and exercises. These workshops engaged with decision makers on the government's decision-making processes in a major disaster that overwhelms national capacities, to determine at which point governments can request for specific international assistance that can arrive quickly to augment national rescue efforts, like what we witnessed in Türkiye.*
3. *Improve local capacity building by engaging governments to adopt INSARAG tools such as INSARAG Recognized National Accreditation Processes (IRNAP) and the Community Responders Package, particularly in areas with restricted access to international USAR teams.*
4. *Advocate for enhanced OCHA support for the INSARAG Secretariat through additional staffing and resources.*

Summary:

In response to the 6 February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and at the request of the Turkish government, 49 INSARAG Classified Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Teams from around the world mobilized and deployed, with the first team arriving in country in just over 24 hours. Over the next two weeks, over 3,500 INSARAG Classified USAR specialists worked day and night with their national counterparts, in challenging conditions, to rescue 300 people buried beneath the rubble. This was the largest ever deployment of INSARAG Classified USAR Teams and the largest USAR deployment anywhere to date.

The INSARAG Classified Teams, which included four Turkish Teams, were only one part, albeit a significant one of the overall USAR response. In total, 255 International Classified and non-classified USAR Teams deployed in Türkiye (source: AFAD). Additionally, INSARAG's USAR Coordination Cell (UCC) coordinated the activities of 118 of these teams.

What distinguished the INSARAG Classified Teams from non-classified teams was their professionalism gained through common training, the use of common operating procedures, their coordination from mobilization to demobilization by OCHA/INSARAG and their common use of INSARAG's Information Management Systems. Türkiye's long membership of the INSARAG Network, and their use of the INSARAG Guidelines, also enabled stronger USAR coordination, with national and international INSARAG Teams 'speaking the same language'.

To ensure the continued growth and improvement of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), support from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is essential. Investing in INSARAG will enable the network to maintain its quality standards, enhance its operations, and better serve those in need during disasters and emergencies. By upholding internationally recognized standards and promoting coordination mechanisms, INSARAG plays a critical role in disaster response worldwide.

This paper examines the successes and challenges of INSARAG in its mission to improve urban search and rescue (USAR) operations during natural disasters and emergencies. It outlines INSARAG's history, achievements, and its strategic plan for 2021-2026. INSARAG has grown to include over 90 participating member states, establishing internationally recognized standards in disaster response. Key milestones include the INSARAG External Classification (IEC) system and the INSARAG Recognized National Accreditation Process (IRNAP), which enhance the quality and

localization of USAR teams. INSARAG's Strategic Objectives includes pillars on Quality Standards, Localization, Flexible Response, and Partnerships to strengthen its operations and guide its implementation.

The paper further highlights the significant role that INSARAG played in the response to the Türkiye and Syria earthquakes in February 2023—which was the network's largest-ever deployment. The international USAR teams, adhering to INSARAG guidelines, saved 300 lives in Türkiye. The successes of the Türkiye and Syria response demonstrate INSARAG's effectiveness, particularly in terms of speed, solidarity, partnerships, methodology, and coordination. However, challenges and areas for improvement related to USAR coordination, information management, localization, compliance, logistics, and operating in complex emergencies were identified. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for the future success of INSARAG.

Moving forward, INSARAG aims to strengthen localization efforts and engage governments in disaster-prone areas to adopt its methodology. The network emphasizes the importance of strong local capacities and is exploring ways to raise awareness and provide support to disaster-prone governments. Additionally, INSARAG seeks to explore new areas of response, such as flooding and other climate-related emergencies, and expand its partnerships to remain fit for purpose.

1. Background/Overview

The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) is a global network of search and rescue teams from around the world. It was established in 1991 to create quality standards, training, and coordination systems for urban search and rescue (USAR) teams to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of urban search and rescue operations, in response to natural disasters and other emergencies.

This paper outlines the successes of the network which will continue to be strengthened, and areas that INSARAG can improve upon. In a world where disasters are increasing in frequency and complexity, INSARAG's role in disaster response is paramount to uphold internationally recognized standards and to develop coordination mechanisms for USAR response, while maintaining humanitarian principles and ethics. The network is growing and evolving at a rapid pace, its growth outmatching its current support mechanisms.

The 6 February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria resulted in the largest ever deployment of the INSARAG network. The global response was unprecedented, a true demonstration of global solidarity. At the peak of USAR operations, 199 rescue teams were deployed to the field, of which 49 were INSARAG classified. 9739 search and rescue personnel and 330 search dogs augmented the nationally led search and rescue response. 300 lives were saved by the international USAR response in Türkiye.

As the network was nearly 100% deployed (a few INSARAG teams did not deploy as they were handling domestic disaster responses in their respective countries), teams were unable to redeploy to neighboring Syria, which was also facing the devastating consequences of the earthquakes. Coupled with political challenges and complexities from Syria's ongoing civil conflict, this made the possibility of operating in Syria, especially in the northwest, particularly difficult. Even so, an INSARAG classified team negotiated with local authorities to deploy to Northwest Syria. INSARAG is conscious of the sensitive nature of the international humanitarian response to the disaster in Syria and will use this as an opportunity to reevaluate its role in complex crises going forward.

The Türkiye and Syria earthquakes are a defining moment for INSARAG, ushering in a new era of growth for the network. International USAR teams operating in accordance with the globally accepted INSARAG guidelines and methodology played a crucial role in providing lifesaving services to those affected by this unprecedented disaster. This event underscores INSARAG's unique and extremely valuable role in response and highlights the key areas where it must evolve and adapt to better serve this role in the future. OCHA should continue to invest in supporting INSARAG, ensuring that the system's 32 years of experience and development continue to evolve and improve. Doing so will cement INSARAG's critical function and better serve those in need.

2. INSARAG's 32 Year History and Achievements

a. Key Milestones and History

Since its inception, INSARAG has grown in size and influence, with over 90 participating member states now in the network, establishing internationally recognized standards in disaster response. INSARAG has achieved several

milestones over the years, including the introduction of the INSARAG classification system, which allows international USAR teams to be classified by peers within the network according to established standards and guidelines. 64 teams have been classified under this system to date. These teams have deployed to numerous emergencies and earthquakes requiring international assistance, from Armenia in 1988 to major earthquakes and tsunamis such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, Haiti in 2010, Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011, Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan in 2011, the Nepal earthquake in 2015 to name a few.

INSARAG has continued to drive quality standards and assurance in urban search and rescue, with a particular focus on strengthening localization. The INSARAG Recognized National Accreditation Process (IRNAP), introduced in 2017, has played a crucial role in this effort by providing a framework for the national accreditation of USAR teams. Additionally, global meetings held in 2010, 2015, and 2021 have pursued the localization agenda, emphasizing the importance of strengthening local capacities and building sustainable specialized disaster response systems. INSARAG's flexible response agenda has also been demonstrated by teams with flood rescue capability deploying to Mozambique, Pakistan, Australia, and Malawi to respond to floods in recent years.

b. INSARAG Strategic Plan 2021-26:

More than twenty years have passed since the adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 57/150 which established the INSARAG Network. While most INSARAG classified teams are currently in Europe, the balance is gradually shifting with more teams joining the network from the Americas, Asia, and Africa. Seven national teams have completed the INSARAG Recognized National Accreditation Process (IRNAP) and another six are preparing for the IRNAP. The combination of prioritizing international USAR Teams and promoting the training of national and sub-national USAR Teams, which has been embraced by member states, positions INSARAG strongly for the future.

INSARAG's strategic plan 2021-26 focuses on 4 key areas:

- **Quality standards and compliance-** Strengthening global standards for a high quality of national and international USAR response by improving the INSARAG methodology to be "fit for purpose" through regional group consultations to improve the INSARAG guidelines on the national, regional, and international levels. Currently, there is one scheduled INSARAG External Classification (IEC) and 9 INSARAG External Reclassifications (IER) upcoming. Paired with increasing interest driven by the recent deployments, the INSARAG Secretariat requires more support to maintain its quality standards for classification. The network is considering new approaches to IECs, earthquake response training, and leveraging modern technologies such as the use of radar detectors for live searches. To develop these, the network has established a guideline review group (GRG) for 2023-25.

- **Strengthening Localization** – INSARAG is committed to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of frontline emergency response by adapting and localizing the INSARAG guidelines and methodology to country contexts. IRNAP has been developed to allow countries to adopt the INSARAG methodologies into their own systems. Furthermore, INSARAG is exploring methods to bring awareness of the network to OCHA's regional and country offices in disaster-prone areas.

- **Flexible Response -** Promoting agility and flexibility of rescue teams in response operations across other disaster relief activities. Given the increase in extreme weather-related disasters requiring assistance beyond conventional USAR operations, to ensure future sustainability of USAR assets at national and international level and to stay relevant to the needs of the affected people. INSARAG is looking to establish a flood-response working group, to enable deployment to flood emergencies by INSARAG teams with this skillset. Furthermore, INSARAG is exploring the relevancy of the network in responding to complex emergencies.

- **Partnerships**- INSARAG is looking to expand and strengthen its partnerships. Synergy between INSARAG and UNDAC is pivotal to the success of deployment operations. INSARAG and UNDAC are coordinating meetings and training exercises to be held back-to-back to maximize engagement with partners in multiple areas and to also engage OCHA's regional and country offices.

3. Successes and Issues for Consideration from the Response to Türkiye and Syria

This was a disaster of immense scale. The affected area spanned more than 150,000km^2. The INSARAG network deployed 87% of its classified teams to Türkiye. It demonstrated that the INSARAG system works – the majority of INSARAG teams deployed in accordance with the globally accepted INSARAG guidelines – preparedness, mobilization, response, and demobilization. The success of this operation was not without its challenges due to the scale and complexity of the disaster. While 7 teams reorganized and redeployed part of their teams into Syria (and one team also deploying in Northwest Syria), greater preparedness engagements with support of OCHA's field presence in these locations can help pave the way well ahead for the next disaster in a crisis zone.

a. Successes

Speed, Solidarity: The call for international assistance from the Turkish authorities were answered swiftly. A rapid and cooperative response to this disaster was paramount to the success of the international USAR effort which ultimately allowed for 300 lives to be saved. 72 hours is the "golden window" for rescue in collapsed structure emergencies, while some miracles can (and did) happen beyond this window, it is crucial for rescue teams to be working as soon as possible to be successful. In this instance, the INSARAG network established a reception and departure center (RDC) for incoming USAR teams within 24 hours of the call for assistance. This allowed arriving USAR teams to be directed to worksites immediately upon arrival in Türkiye and commence rescue operations.

Partnerships: The close relationship between INSARAG and the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) was pivotal to the speed and effectiveness of the response. INSARAG must further fortify localization efforts and build partnerships in other disaster-prone contexts to ensure swift, effective, and well-coordinated response in the future. INSARAG must leverage strong partnerships established with national disaster management agencies. Dedicated Emergency Response Section (ERS) Regional Focal Points (RFP), currently based in Regional Offices of Latin America and the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and Asia Pacific (ROLAC, ROSEA and ROAP) can engage earthquake and disaster-prone countries in their regions through INSARAG earthquake response exercises (ERE) and INSARAG assessment missions.

Effective Methodology: INSARAG's methodology allowed for efficient operations and coordination mechanisms. Classified teams added value and leadership to the international response. In Türkiye, many non-classified teams aided in the response. These teams were coordinated through the INSARAG system and used many of the tools developed for the network such as the INSARAG Coordination Management System (ICMS) and the Virtual On-Site Operations Coordination Centre (VOSOCC). A timely five-yearly review of the guidelines began in 2023. Invaluable policy and technical lessons gained from the earthquake responses based on an ongoing after-action review (AAR) by various stakeholders will be included.

Extensive and Effective Coordination: Coordination mechanisms between UNDAC and INSARAG and managing ten coordination centers established at the height of the operations and each up to 200kms apart, was challenging and proved necessary and successful. This partnership should be further strengthened to meet the needs of large-scale disaster response in the future**.** A dedicated USAR trained UNDAC team will be activated for future earthquake responses and travel at equal speed together with their respective international USAR teams. Frequent engagements with the national authorities through our trainings and exercises, ensuring their familiarity with international coordination arrangements and services, and with our OCHA offices leading the way, will be essential to hit the ground running the moment disaster strikes.

Decisive Response: INSARAG's robust systems enabled a rapid and decisive response from international teams shortly after the initial earthquake. Teams began arriving in the country within 24 hours. 87% of INSARAG classified teams responded to the crisis, underscoring the great solidarity of the network. Furthermore, the government's rapid decision within hours of the disaster to call for INSARAG teams to augment national response have been instrumental to the hundreds of lives saved by the international USAR teams.

The AFAD authorities were the INSARAG regional chair and hosted the INSARAG earthquake response exercise just a year ago and are very well versed with the INSARAG and UNDAC system. Disaster prone countries are strongly encouraged to join the INSARAG network and mutually share best practices with other teams from the network. OCHA offices can again lead the way to advocate this with their host countries.

b. Areas for Improvement

Several areas for improvement related to the Türkiye response were raised during the INSARAG Team Leaders Meeting in February 2023:

USAR Coordination: The relationship and cooperation between USAR and UNDAC operations during a mission are crucial and must be strengthened. UNDAC and INSARAG must continue to work hand in glove to strengthen international USAR coordination with the national authorities leading the response.

Information management: The (ICMS) is changing the way INSARAG coordinates, and the system must be reviewed to further improve its efficacy for operations. The INSARAG tools and systems must be evaluated to leverage on new and developing technology to facilitate more efficient and effective USAR coordination.

Localization: Provide enhanced guidance to member states on incorporating USAR coordination principles into national disaster preparedness and response plans, including USAR assessment. Training of local communities to respond in the first instance of a disaster is key to 90% of lives being saved. The INSARAG first responders' program is designed to equip and train communities to do just that – save lives immediately by trained members of the community when it matters most.

IEC/R compliance: The importance of RDC/USAR Coordination Cell (UCC)/sector coordination cell (SCC) operations must be enforced in the IEC/IER process. UNDAC must provide leadership with dedicated teams and INSARAG supporting. INSARAG must assess and enforce guidelines compliance. INSARAG is in the process of establishing a dedicated guidelines review working group and will consult the network and partners.

Logistics Expectations: Logistical knowledge in the teams can be strengthened by improving logistics TORs in the guidelines and through specialized training.

USAR operations: The design of a new App/Form that allows teams to quickly submit relevant information would be beneficial to speed up information sharing and the coordination of operations. The technological advancements and methodology to speed up the technical search of entrapped victims and the medical approaches to managing crush injuries will be reviewed by INSARAG's technical working groups and partners to strengthen the effectiveness of our operations.

USAR Access and Safety in Complex Emergencies: INSARAG is actively discussing the plausibility of USAR operations in conflict areas. The INSARAG network was deployed to Türkiye at its full capacity. Concurrent to the disaster in Türkiye was an equally devastating disaster in Syria. Despite a call for redeployment to Syria, few international USAR teams chose to do this. Only one team responded in Northwest Syria, where political challenges were a barrier to access for UN humanitarian aid. INSARAG must evaluate its role and capacity to respond to complex emergencies and those taking place in areas with no formal UN representation noting that it is not INSARAG's role to negotiate access at either the political or operational levels. INSARAG must do everything in its capacity to uphold humanitarian principles in a pragmatic, effective, and safe way. OCHA's field presence can support this by engaging with RSB/ERS's regional focal points to organize preparedness training and exercises with the aim of strengthening local capacities through engaging local communities in INSARAG.

Note: These issues will be carried forward and analyzed by the network during after-action review activities throughout 2023 and will be brought to the "Global Forum on the INSARAG After-Action Review of the USAR response to the Türkiye and Syria Earthquakes" event being held in Qatar from 17-18 October 2023.

4. Moving Forward

a. Strengthening Localization and Engaging Governments in Disaster-Prone Areas

INSARAG promotes adoption by national governments and USAR teams of INSARAG methodology for preparedness and response. Countries can translate the guidelines and incorporate them into their national disaster response plans and standards for USAR teams. The guidelines have already been translated into 8 languages. Examples of progress in this area include the establishment of the INSARAG Recognized National Accreditation Process (IRNAP) and the First Responders Package (FRP)—which is currently being finalized for implementation.

Strong local capacities are the cornerstone of successful USAR response operations. International USAR deployments serve to augment local response when disasters occur. INSARAG is committed to local capacity building and standardizing USAR procedures, especially in disaster-prone areas. INSARAG is exploring ways to engage with disaster-prone governments to bring awareness to the RSB/ERS international emergency response tools and mechanisms that are available to them. INSARAG, with support from the Operations and Advocacy Division (OAD) will build upon its partnerships with OCHA country and regional offices through its ERS RFPs.

b. Flexible Response

Recent responses by INSARAG teams to flooding in Malawi and the key decision during the INSARAG Steering Group Meeting (ISG) 2023 to establish a new flood response working group demonstrate the network's intention to explore new areas of disaster response for teams with such capacities, while USAR remains to the cornerstone of INSARAG.

Flexible Response is an area of growing contention amongst the regional networks, i.e., the use of specialized USAR (essentially collapsed structure rescue) versus the need to have a system that responds additionally to flooding, which effects many of the network's member states more frequently than earthquakes or building collapse. The Europeans have greater capacity and do not want to 'compromise' on INSARAG's quality standards, whilst the other regions, who have less capacity and are more disaster affected, want a more flexible system. Informally the Secretariat will continue to facilitate the deployment of suitable response teams through its extensive network as it has for the Pakistan forest fires and Pakistan, Australia, and most recently, the Malawi flooding. We will continue to address this issue through regional and global meetings. OCHA and the INSARAG Secretariat occasionally receive requests for flood response assistance from affected countries or the UN Resident Coordinator. To address this, INSARAG will create a voluntary roster of teams with water rescue capabilities available for deployment upon request.

c. Complex Emergencies

Earthquakes and other natural disasters that occur in conflict zones and other humanitarian emergencies are a significant area of concern for INSARAG, as reaffirmed by the crisis in Northwest Syria. Entering an area with active conflict puts rescuers at risk of being targeted. Rescue teams operate self-sufficiently with limited resources and face daunting challenges in logistics and access. Safety is never guaranteed for rescuers in any emergency, complex emergencies add significant security concerns for international teams. This is new terrain for the INSARAG network. INSARAG will explore its feasibility and assess the life-saving role the network can play in these types of emergencies. This is a complex proposition that will be discussed in upcoming ISG and network meetings. Member States reticence to expose their nationals to the risks associated with conflict will be a central issue. With the endorsement of the Community Responders Program to equip local communities with rescue skills, ERS RFPs and the regional networks will reach out to these countries and offer this training to their communities to strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response before crises occur.

d. Regional Realignment:

INSARAG is currently divided into three distinct regions, namely AEME, AP, and the Americas. While the Americas and Asia have been functioning well, there have been certain inadequacies in the provision of services to the Caribbean and Pacific regions, owing to their unique hazard profiles and disaster management structures. Consequently, there is an ongoing plan to prioritize localization in these regions.

However, this is not the case for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, which is a vast region characterized by differing hazard profiles, capabilities, and disaster management structures. Therefore, it has been proposed that a more appropriate and contextualized approach would be to divide the region into three sub-regions: North Africa and the Middle East, the remainder of Africa, and Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). While this is by far the most sensible

way to support the regions, it requires greater support. **A P3 and UNV or similar staffing structure based in MENA can more effectively support the region. The Middle East is also exploring the establishment of an INSARAG satellite office to better meet the demands of members in this region.**

5. New Approaches and Technological Advancements

INSARAG is constantly evolving and reevaluating its approach to disaster response. The lessons learned from the response to the Türkiye and Syria earthquakes will continue to be discussed and analyzed with our partners through an ongoing AAR throughout 2023. In addition to the growth of the network and the adaptation of guidelines, the network is exploring new approaches and technology that may improve future search and rescue deployments.

Among these include the medical working group evaluating medical extrication considerations for crush injuries, telemedicine, and field hospitals to improve the quality of care provided for disaster victims. Other parts of the network are exploring the use of advanced technology in search techniques, such as the use of drones and radar detectors. USAR teams successfully employed some of these methods during the response to Türkiye. These technologies have the potential to revolutionize USAR efforts by providing more detailed information about disaster sites and helping to identify survivors more quickly. INSARAG's Team Leaders and Working Groups will continue to review and add new guidance, including the use of technologies into our guidelines and methodology. Logistics arrangements especially in response to wintery weather can take its toll on the rescuers and equipment and resources.

Working Groups for Technical Search and Logistics are recommended to put forward recommendations to strengthen these areas – consultations will be held at the upcoming AAR and regional meetings to address this.

6. An Energized INSARAG

The recent deployments to Türkiye have proven the effectiveness of the INSARAG system. In addition to the INSARAG classified teams responding there, many unclassified teams responded and were coordinated in accordance with the INSARAG guidelines. This has driven significant new interest from countries and NGO teams seeking INSARAG classification—with USAR teams in countries such as Georgia, Iran, Syria, Macedonia, and others expressing interest. Coupled with a backlog of international USAR teams pending reclassification, the INSARAG Secretariat requires significantly more support to keep up with the growing INSARAG Secretariat support requirements.

The INSARAG Secretariat is understaffed considering its role in managing the network and the increasing number of teams seeking classification. The workload of the two-person OCHA Secretariat is becoming unmanageable, with nearly 60 teams reclassifying every five years. To address this issue, the INSARAG Technical Working Group will review the reclassification process to identify areas where the burden can be lightened. Additionally, some of the growing workload will be redistributed to the three Regional Focal Points (RFPs) supported by a UN Volunteer (UNV) at the three of our regional offices, moving towards regional empowerment and ownership of workplans. While this approach may ease the strain on the Secretariat, the ultimate solution is to provide dedicated capacity through the establishment of an additional staffing in ERS.

As INSARAG continues to grow and expand, and with the strong support it receives from member countries, OCHA can play an instrumental role and ensure INSARAG's continued effectiveness to better respond to disasters and save lives.

Drafted by the INSARAG Secretariat.