

US, Japan and France poor at giving

By Quentin Peel in London

Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands have been ranked as the top four aid donors in providing relief for humanitarian disasters, according to an index published yesterday.

The study, launched by Kofi Annan, former United Nations secretary-general, ranked 23 aid donors from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development according to the effectiveness and impartiality of their relief efforts in eight crisis-hit countries.

In contrast to the Scandinavian nations, big donors such as the US, Japan and France featured in the bottom half of the index, with low scores on tests for impartiality and the implementation of international humanitarian laws. France was criticised for its failure to work effectively with other aid agencies.

The humanitarian response index, drawn up by Dara International, a Madrid-based evaluation agency, placed the European Commission in fifth place in spite of frequent criticism of its bureaucratic procedures. The UK ranked ninth, Germany 13th, and the US 16th out of 23. The bottom two countries were Italy and Greece.

The index was not meant to be "a name-and-shame exercise", said Silvia Hidalgo, director-general of

Dara. It should instead be seen as "a vehicle... to improve the quality of humanitarian aid", she added.

The chart was compiled using the responses of more than 800 aid agencies in disaster zones in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, East Timor, Haiti, Lebanon, Niger, Pakistan and Sudan.

Mr Annan, who launched the report in London, said it would serve as "a crucial tool to help ensure that no disaster is ignored, and that every dollar spent helps those most in need".

The index was produced after the tsunami relief effort in 2005, and the subsequent criticism of the big aid

donors' selective responses to other disasters. The huge response of western countries to the tsunami served to highlight their less generous response to "forgotten crises" away from the media spotlight.

"Even the sudden outpouring of solidarity for the tsunami victims was not sufficient to guarantee an effective response," Mr Annan said.

"The equal worth of every human life demands that humanitarian aid be equitable - that is, free from geostrategic interests, historical ties, domestic political agendas, or the attention of the world's media," he added.

All the donor countries assessed have signed up to

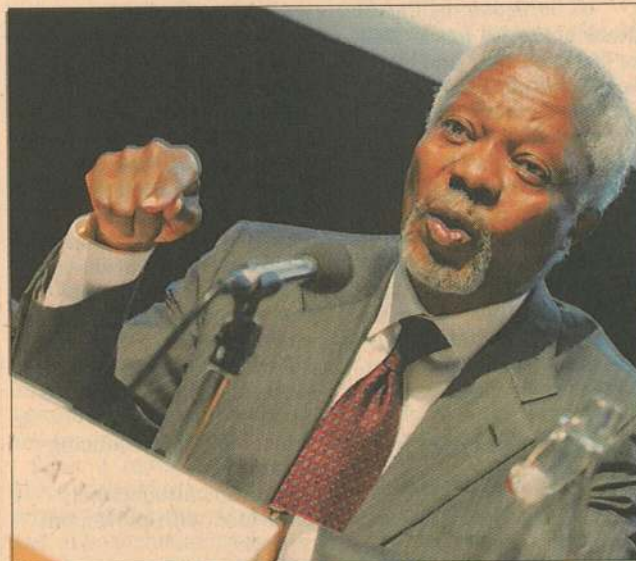
the so-called Good Humanitarian Donorship agreement, established by 16 leading OECD countries and the European Commission in 2003. The index seeks to measure how much these countries respect the ethical principles that should guide humanitarian action, as well as best practices in donor financing, management and accountability.

The authors praised Sweden, which came top in 19 of the 57 variables. Its strong ranking "comes from a distribution of funding that is more focused on forgotten emergencies and those sectors that typically receive low-profile media coverage", they said in the index.

In contrast, the US attracted some of the lowest rankings for perceptions about its respect for basic humanitarian principles, such as alleviation of suffering, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

However, it performed well on consultation with beneficiaries, preparing for emergencies and supporting rapid recovery of sustainable livelihoods.

The UK stood out for "generous funding to the main quick disbursement mechanisms", and was the third most generous donor relative to income. But it ranked low in areas such as enhancing security, protecting human rights and affirming the primary role of civilian organisations.



'Crucial tool': Kofi Annan launches the index yesterday UPPA