The background of the entire page is a dark, almost black, field filled with various tropical leaves. The leaves are rendered in shades of teal and light green, with some having prominent yellowish veins. The leaves are scattered across the page, with some large, heart-shaped leaves with deep lobes (like Monstera) and some smaller, more rounded leaves. The overall effect is a dense, lush jungle feel.

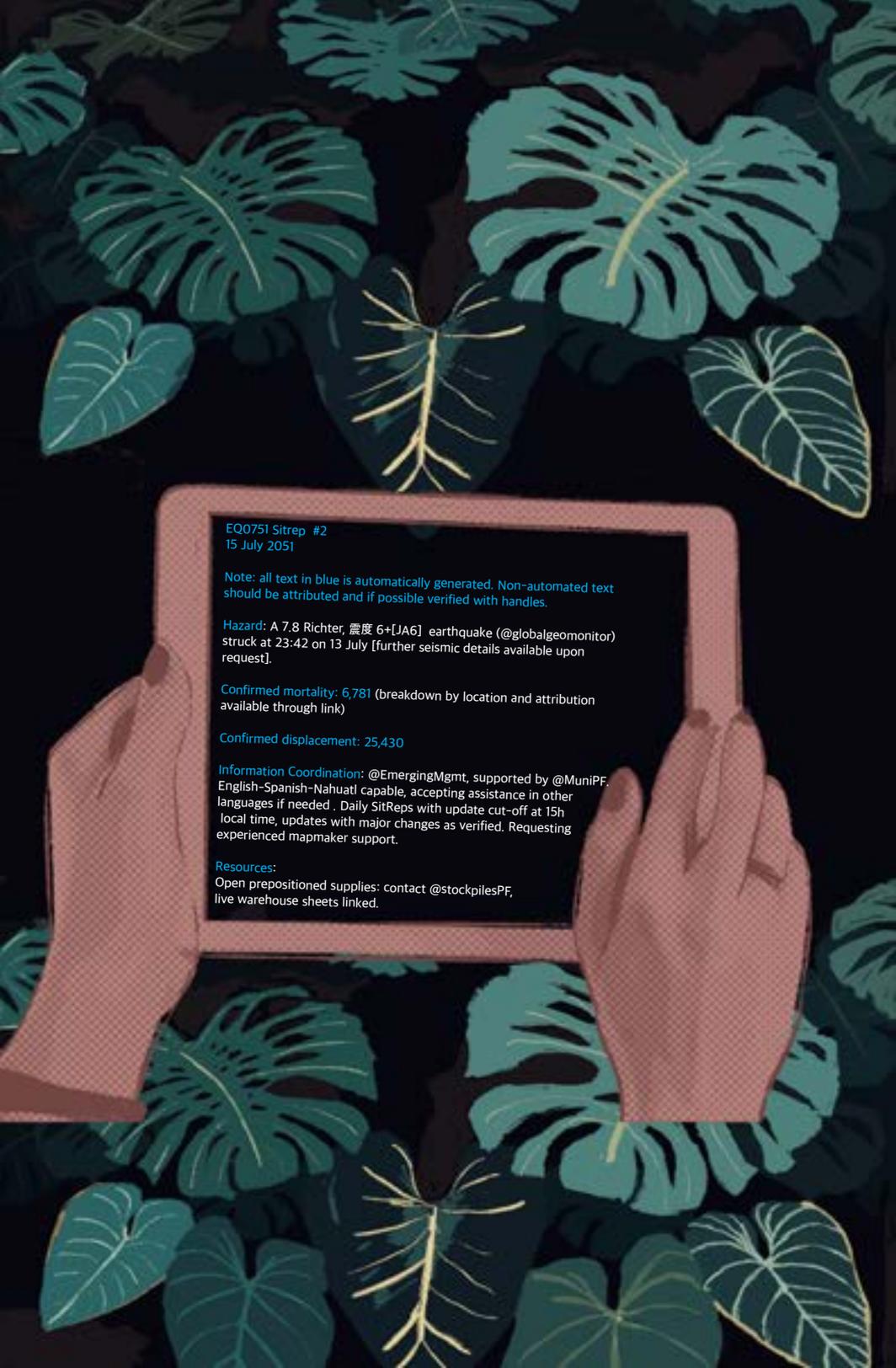
# **Earthquake relief. Mexico. 2051.**

**A glimpse into tomorrow's  
humanitarian world**

**By Malka Older**

**The New  
Humanitarian |**

In [The New Humanitarian](#)'s first ever fictional story, author [Malka Older](#), known for her science-fiction thrillers, draws on more than 10 years of experience in the aid sector to take us to post-disaster Mexico in 2051.



EQ0751 Sitrep #2  
15 July 2021

Note: all text in blue is automatically generated. Non-automated text should be attributed and if possible verified with handles.

Hazard: A 7.8 Richter, 震度 6+[JA6] earthquake (@globalgeomonitor) struck at 23:42 on 13 July [further seismic details available upon request].

Confirmed mortality: 6,781 (breakdown by location and attribution available through link)

Confirmed displacement: 25,430

Information Coordination: @EmergingMgmt, supported by @MuniPF. English-Spanish-Nahuatl capable, accepting assistance in other languages if needed. Daily SitReps with update cut-off at 15h local time, updates with major changes as verified. Requesting experienced mapmaker support.

**Resources:**

Open prepositioned supplies: contact @stockpilesPF, live warehouse sheets linked.

You are sitting at the reception desk next to Giulia (this person you have known for less than two days but spent most of those two days with), and you have your heads together going over the list of registrations – all the people who are now living here, in this high school, because they don't have homes any more or are afraid to return to them. You are one of them, your house shaken and probably structurally unsound – maybe it even collapsed after you grabbed your bag of emergency supplies and ran. You've been sleeping in what was your dramatic arts classroom some 15 years ago (which is ironic or something), along with 20 other people camped out on smelly gym mats and feeling lucky to have them. When someone came around after your first night of aftershock-disturbed sleep asking who wanted to help manage the shelter, you stood up – partly because you work for the municipality, it felt like you should, and mostly because working seemed better than sitting there thinking.

So now you are sitting at the reception desk instead. It was Giulia, a woman in her thirties from Sicily – “Got into this work after the Etna eruption five years ago” – who had put together the template for the registration, pulling the questions to be asked out of her head and setting them neatly into a format. You did a shift on registration duty filling those templates in, but that's already a blur, and thankfully so, because you don't want to remember the people you were registering, or especially the kids, all shocked and sad, some still trembling. Now though, when Giulia runs her finger down the list, you sometimes connect names with faces, and you can explain to her where the different addresses are. It's grounding to feel like you are competent at something, even if it is just the geography of your own city. But at the same time, you are getting a mental

picture of how much has fallen down, and you barely slept last night.

Every so often the desk vibrates and you jump and Giulia stares at the hanging light fixture to see how much it swings, but so far it has always stopped vibrating before you run out the door the way you did three days ago right before your house started haemorrhaging ceiling tiles.

A woman walks in from outside and up to the desk – you put on your welcoming smile because anyone who has been through the past three days deserves a smile. Madoka, the Japanese woman who briefed you before your first stint on reception, said new arrivals should feel welcome when they get here, because this is going to be a good, safe place for them to be; you're not quite confident about that but willing to try to sell it. But this woman doesn't look like she ran out of her house in the midst of an earthquake: she's carrying a bag and dressed neatly.

“Sana Callon,” the woman says, holding out a hand. “Handle: @getsitdone. I'm based out of Beirut. Heard you might need some help here.”

Another one, you think, as you shake her hand: another stranger from far away (Beirut!) to... help. Or work.

Giulia is shaking her hand. “You came out on spec?”

“Sure. My local paid for the flight.”

Local? Giulia turns to you and murmurs, “She means Sana's municipality's local emergency fund. It's a good sign they were willing to pay for her travel: it means she's experienced. They wouldn't put up the money unless they were confident she'd find a way to provide value, and they'll get paid back by our local funds here.”

“Oh,” you say, nodding as if that made sense. You know your municipality has an emergency fund – had, maybe, since this is sure to wipe it out – but you hadn't

really thought about the mechanics of how it would be used in a situation like this, and you're not quite sure it squares.

Ever since you started helping, these foreigners have been saying two things to you: You and your community are in charge here and We're here to offer our experience when you're exhausted or don't know what to do. But you are exhausted all the time, everyone is exhausted all the time, and you never know what to do, so how can you be in charge?

Giulia would probably have a long discourse on that conundrum if you asked her, but you're too tired.

"Most people," Giulia goes on, explaining because she knows you don't know what to do, "try to set up jobs before they leave for a disaster site, to make sure there will be something for them to do."

"I like to see what there is before I decide where to work," Sana says.

"Oh," you say again, before adding – because you work for the municipality so it feels like your responsibility – "Can our local funds afford you?" There is so much right now, so much to be done, so much money, so many strangers coming from far away and strangers from your own city all crowded into the high school gymnasium, the classrooms, the hallways – snores and breath filling the air.

"Oh yes," Giulia says, "the funds will pay for whatever you need. You don't have to worry about money, really."

That doesn't make any sense. How can you not need to worry about money? True, this earthquake that has upended your city and your life is probably simpler and more cost-effective than, oh, the endless conflicts in faraway places you read about on the news, or one of those cascading disasters they talk about now – natural and industrial triggers amplifying each other. But still... Is

there really enough money in the world to just... fix this, no matter what the cost?

"It's all right," Sana says, easy. "If you don't need me here, I'll try another shelter. There are plenty, and according to the sitrep, most still need assistance."

"What can you do?" Giulia asks.

"I'm certified for wat/san, info and comms, and camp management, but I've dabbled in pretty much everything in the past."

"Whereabouts?" Giulia asks, and Sana runs through place-names and dates, a few of which connect in your mind, producing images of news videos, catastrophe after catastrophe.

And now, this place and this time. From now on, when you tell someone where you're from, they will think of this earthquake.

"Hmm." Giulia fiddles with the registration forms. "Do you know Abdullah Daoud?" Sana frowns in thought. "Goes by @PostureSyndrome."

"Oh yeah! We had team houses across the street from each other in Cascadia. Wow, that was a mess. Yeah, Abdullah's a good infotech, and easy to get on with, too. I remember one time..."

Sana seems to like telling a story, which might be welcome some other time but right now your tired mind shivers away from these tales of more disasters, disasters turned into stories of camaraderie, and you lose focus until you notice Giulia giving you a meaningful look. She wants you to decide about hiring Sana, and you can't conjure anything beyond a shrug: how can you know? And if there's a way to know, you're probably too tired to try it. Probably this shelter needs more help? But the cost...

"Normally this would go to the full shelter committee," Giulia says to you gently, "but they're barely set up, and mostly extremely short of sleep. In the first

few days, like this, what we often do is start with a temporary alignment contract. No commitment, see how it works out. Then we can review with the full committee in a week or so when they've settled in a bit. If that's alright with you?" She adds, addressing Sana.

"Perfect," Sana agrees. "Where should I start?"

Giulia frowns at her tablet, flicking through screens. "Maybe coordination? We're coming up on a benchmark for updates pretty soon – Yep, in three hours." She sighs. "I used to think coordination meetings were bad. You've worked fully asynchronous before?"

"Oh yeah," Sana says. "Fewer meetings, still plenty of headaches."

"Well." Giulia shrugs. "Less lost time, too. And before you dig into that..." She turns to you. "You've been working on the registration for a while. Why don't you give Sana the tour and then take a break for a while?"

You don't look at Sana as you walk her back into the belly of the school, but she talks to you anyway. "You from here?"

At least that only requires a nod, although you brace yourself for the follow-up questions probing gently at what you might have lost.

"Have you ever dealt with a disaster before?"

Not what you expected. "Just small ones. Traffic accidents, mostly. A rockslide once. I was in the city hall and..." You stop there. In your surprise, you answered at length, but the unintentional use of the past tense startles you. "I still work for the city hall."

You've led her to what was once the music room, where Madoka is talking to a group of residents in a mixture of languages. Spanish is the backbone, but there were interpreters converting her remarks into Nahuatl, Totonaco, and sign language. From what you catch of the conversation, they're calculating how many of the

indoor bathrooms should be sectioned off for vulnerable groups.

“And now you’re taking a leadership role in this evacuation centre,” Sana says, but like an agreement, not like a question. “Well. I look forward to working with you.” She goes to talk to Madoka. You linger in the hallway. You’re supposed to go and rest, but you don’t think you’ll be able to sleep, and you go back to the reception desk instead.



Over the next few days you try to work up the energy to delve into the budget question, because not worrying about the budget has not been your experience, ever. But it is one of your former colleagues (and maybe future, if the city hall comes back in anything like its previous organisations) who brings it up; he’s always been more willing to bring up uncomfortable topics than you are.

The topic had been when to shift to rebuilding and how to get access to the latest expertise on resilient, energy-efficient, environmentally attuned, sustainable construction, and people, mainly the foreigners, were throwing out names and getting excited about various innovations when he broke in with: “How do we pay for this? How do we pay for all of you? Shouldn’t we be more careful and save money?”

It’s Sana, the new one, who answers, and she starts by saying that a decade or even less ago, he would have been absolutely right. “I used to work for an organisation that did this work – an NGO.” Everyone nods; some people roll their eyes. “We got our money from rich country governments or big foundations. Before we spent anything beyond the very limited discretionary money we scrimped together, we would have to write a proposal, submit it to our donor, wait for them to approve it. Then, if we wanted to change anything, we would have to clear it with them. What we

did was driven by what donors wanted as much as by the needs on the ground, and that didn't only mean political agendas, it also meant things like preferring projects that are visible and exciting over boring but important stuff."

Sana paused to take a swig from her thermos and went on. "Everyone was getting more and more frustrated with how the system worked. I mean, I liked my organisation, mostly, but the quality and values varied a lot from place to place depending who was in charge. Also, it costs money to have an organisation – a headquarters, marketing for the organisation itself, highly paid permanent employees whose job was the organisation rather than the work, and so on." She took a deep breath and went on. "Anyway, at the same time, those same rich governments that were funding this stuff increasingly needed outside assistance too, and they weren't very good at getting it, and didn't like having other people in charge. And it became clearer and clearer that disasters are a problem for everyone, and when a disaster doesn't get enough help that's bad for everyone, not just the people immediately affected, and that it's stupidly inefficient to make people wait for people who are nowhere nearby to decide what they think money should be spent on, and so finally we got this new system."

"It's still based on money," your colleague said. "How can we not worry about the budget?"

"First of all, it comes from emergency budgets, not other budgets. Every government – local, regional, national – is required to put aside a minimum percentage of their budget for emergencies. So we start with that. With something big like this, when it overflows the local budget, the regional one is automatically pulled in, then national."

You break in at that point. "Okay, but it is still a limited budget! There could easily be other emergencies that need funding somewhere else in our country this year!"

“True,” Sana acknowledges. “And that’s what people were really worried about when we shifted to trying this system out. But another thing that people noticed, back on the old system, is that often the best assistance was mutual aid. And that got kind of expanded and solidified and made more flexible, and, anyway, now it’s on a global level. Mostly, it evens out globally over time, but there’s also a general agreement that it’s much easier to deal with emergencies without penny-pinching or micromanaging, especially at the beginning. With complex, long-running crises like war, things have to work a little differently, but for disasters like this, or industrial accidents, basically, no one wants to worry about limits in the early days of a disaster, and at the same time, so far at least, no jurisdiction uses all their emergency budget every year, so most places have extra.”

“And so they just – what? Give it to us?”

“Why not? They know if they run short, or if they themselves have a big disaster on their hands, you or someone else will be giving them support.” She grinned at them, spreading her hands. “Mutual aid. Preparedness. Building back better. Locally driven. All the things we used to talk about, but without spending a lot of money on far-away offices or advertising or image, and with a real sense of solidarity to back it up.”

After that, the meeting moves on, which is probably good because that was about as much budget talk as most people could take, and you have other things to get done.

But you have done a lot of budget work in your job at the city hall, and you have more questions. You don’t get a chance to ask them until almost a week later, after the one-day break from the work at the evacuation shelter that everyone was taking in rotation. You don’t feel rested and relaxed, exactly, and what with all the aftershocks you didn’t get much more sleep than you would have at the shelter, but at least you saw your sister, checked on the remains of your house, and cautiously

retrieved some of your belongings – and a degree of peace of mind comes with that.



You find Sana in the new snack room, an idea someone had four days ago that was approved and organised in a meeting three days ago and has been fully stocked during the time you were out. “This is...” you say, turning in place to see the walls of what was once an office lined with packaged snacks or other food that could be eaten raw. There are a few old school chairs in different configurations, a cluster of teenagers in one grouping, and two old women gossiping in another.

“Isn’t it amazing? Seems like everyone appreciates having an alternative to the canteen meals.” Sana is sitting on one of the chairs, munching on a bag of raisins. You don’t feel quite sure yet about taking the food, so you sit down by her, without anything, and she holds the bag out to you on offer. You shake your head, then feel obliged to be enthusiastic about the snack room.

“Really amazing,” you agree, “I should tell my...” and you stop, because maybe she won’t want you telling your sister, who lives in a different shelter, about this brilliant idea.

Sana looks up. “Tell your friends? You definitely should. We already put the idea up in the coordination space. Actually, it wasn’t even our idea, although we’re the first ones to implement it here, but it was done after that coastal oil fire in Nagoya a couple of years ago.”

You grimace, thinking of the coordination space: all those orders, the quantities extravagantly guessed at in quick meetings, all with their status listed as in

process or on the way. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about," you say. "I visited my sister, who's in the evacuation centre on the south of town, and since I've been back I've heard other people here talking about it, because a lot of us know people over there, and the people working there... the things they're planning sound... good."

"Are you thinking about a transfer?"

You shrug uncomfortably, because you were secretly and deep down, but what you had been planning to ask was less guilt-ridden. "I was thinking about adopting some of those ideas or... or how to change what we're doing."

"It's not a problem," Sana answers, sounding a little puzzled. "You – all of you, the resident representative committee, the shelter management staff – you're in charge. You can make whatever changes you want. If you hear about something being done somewhere else that sounds good for here, we can work on how to do it?"

Then why, you wonder, are Sana and all these other strangers here in the first place? But you feel guilty even thinking it, because without this extra help would you have been able to take that day off yesterday?

Would you have allowed yourself to take the day off, if there hadn't been an authoritative stranger there insisting that you could and should?

But they are still authoritative strangers, and you say, "And if we'd prefer to have someone else do it?"

It actually takes her a moment to figure out what you mean. "Oh, you mean get rid of us internationals? You can do that whenever you want." You glare at her sceptically, and she spreads her hands. "Really. Look, we're here to help. You can tell us to get lost whenever you want."

This doesn't help your mood, possibly because you doubt the rest of the management team would agree on that, at least not yet. "Then, why are you here at all?"

"Well, for one thing, no matter how many manuals and trainings you have, it's not the same as experiencing a disaster, and it's hard to experience multiple large disasters unless you're willing to travel for it. That's one reason my local group paid out of their emergency fund to send me here, you know: it keeps me in practice, up-to-date on technologies, builds my network." Perhaps she realises she's mainly talking about the benefit to her, so she goes on quickly. "Once you all feel more comfortable, you can tell us to get lost, as I said, or you can keep us around but really as support staff, you know, with you most definitely in charge. Because not everyone..."

She stops.

"What?"

"Well, not everyone likes this kind of work. And in any given --"

"You like this?"

"Not the disaster," she says. "But do I find the work satisfying, helping people after a disaster? Yes, of course. And I like the pace, and I like meeting people all over the world, and some people hate the pace and the pressure and the uncertainty. A lot of people hate it. And it's way easier to hate it when you're caught up in it yourself. In my experience," she says, and she's not looking at you, as though whatever's on your face might be too private, "when people are hit by a disaster and get involved afterwards and start learning how to do it, there are always some who get it, who enjoy the work or at least don't mind it, and there are some who hate it and can't wait to get back to their normal, slower, careful jobs. And usually there aren't enough people who don't mind it to do everything. So, people like me, who enjoy it, can patch in for people who hate it. If they want us to." She shrugs. "Plenty of work out there. I don't have to do mine here. And then," she adds, "of those people who

like the work, some of them really like it and are also in a position to travel, and maybe they set up as international consultants, and that way there are a few more people who have experience and don't hate doing it for the next big disaster."

"You mean I could... do what you're doing?"

"If you want to," she answers, as though it's obvious.

You don't know whether you want to, so after a pause you change the subject instead. "How did you get all these snacks in here so fast?" You are thinking, again, how do we afford this? Surely snacks don't count as essential emergency spending.

"Most of the fresh stuff is pure donation from shops that knew they wouldn't be able to sell it before it went bad, but we paid shopkeepers for the non-perishables."

It spills out of you. "How do we afford that? Isn't someone checking? That's not – it's not important."

Sana leans towards you. "It is important. You, all of you, have been through something terrible. You're entitled to comfort. And the shopkeepers are better off for getting some money now, when almost no one is in a position to shop. And someone is checking, but that someone is your committee. If you want to do this, it's an approved use of funds."

"But where does that money come from?"

"I told you," Sana says. "Emergency funds that have been set aside all over the world. But I'll tell you what else." She leans in. "Think about how much money is wasted every day by governments on stuff much less urgent than this. Think about the fact that governments can print money if they don't have enough. Yes," she goes on impatiently, seeing you open your mouth to object, "inflation is a concern. But in a crisis that would otherwise contract the economy, done judiciously? There's a commitment to injecting money into the

economy if necessary to cover emergency costs. People finally decided that it's silly and counterproductive to impose false scarcity constraints on situations like disasters – situations where people already face so much scarcity and that have such large ripple effects through the economy, not to mention the suffering people go through."

"They can do that?"

"Sure. Just like they can forgive debts – remember when that happened? The economy isn't some set of natural laws like gravity. We made it. And when people need help, it's better for all of us if they get it, and as stress-free as possible." She lets you absorb that. "Maybe you feel better about taking a snack now?"

It feels like an admission that you were wrong, but also like the opening of an incredible new set of possibilities, so you get up and grab a pack of dried fruit. At least a vendor got paid for that. "Why," you ask as you sit down again, holding the opened bag out to her, "don't we do that for people in need all the time?"

"We do, now," Sana says, taking a piece. "Took us long enough to get here, years, decades of advocacy and activism and chance upheaval that brought sympathy from people with power, and lots and lots of economists saying we were right about it and So... Many.... Meetings. But here we are."

"No," you say, "I mean not just during disasters? Why do we have to wait for disasters to fix stuff?"

Sana takes another piece of fruit. "We're working on that too," she promises. "Hopefully, it won't take too much longer."



