

PALAU: BRIDGE COLLAPSE

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The Disaster

The bridge linking Koror and Babelthaup, the two main islands of the Pacific nation of Palau, collapsed on Thursday, 26 September, killing one person and slightly injuring four others. The collapse of the bridge, which carried pipes conveying water from Babelthaup to Koror, has cut off the water supply for almost all the 12,000 inhabitants of Koror, the country's most populated island. There is no natural water source on the island (7.1 sq. miles), although it has one storage tank with a 10,000 gallons capacity.

Government action

The government of the Republic of Palau has declared a state of emergency. It has asked the USA for assistance in re-establishing water, power and transport services, but this is expected to take at least one month to complete. As a temporary measure it has set up a limited number of "water buffaloes" each holding 150 gallons of water drawn from the storage tank, in community centres, but these are not within everybody's reach and in any case have already completely exhausted the stored supplies. Besides the immediate drinking water shortage there is also a potential sanitation problem, since water is needed to flush toilets connected to the water-sealed sewerage system.

The Government has asked the Palau Red Cross to assist in the provision of drinking water to all households and the Society has turned to the Federation for support in meeting this request.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The Palau Red Cross has drawn up a plan to pump water from the well on Babelthaup into small water containers which it will transport by boat between the two islands and by truck on Koror. It will distribute 10 litres per day per person to each household.

The government has agreed to provide transport for the distributions, which will be carried out by Palau RC volunteers and government workers. A warehouse to store the containers has been secured and volunteers and trucks are now standing by for the operation.

To carry out the operation the Palau RC needs the following equipment, none of which is available locally:

- ◆ six portable, petrol-driven pumps
- ◆ 200 water containers, with a 200 litre capacity for the transport and distribution of water
- ◆ 3,000 collapsible jerry cans for drinking water and 6,000 buckets with lids for washing water, to be distributed to all 3,000 households on the island

The Japanese Red Cross has kindly provided its services in locating and procuring these supplies. The first consignment, comprising 3,096 collapsible water containers and 6 motor driven water pumps, left tonight by a commercial flight to Guam for onward transportation to Palau. It should reach Kokor by tomorrow, 02/10.

Suppliers for 200 water containers and 6,000 buckets with lids are being identified. This will be a much more bulky second consignment and estimations are that the transport costs, with unavoidable transit via Guam, may be very high. Contacts are being taken with the American RC to investigate the possibilities of the US Military assisting with this air transportation.

This is the first relief operation to be undertaken by this embryo National Society, which has practically no resources of its own to draw on. Financial support from National Societies to cover the funds to be allocated from DREF (an estimated CHF 100,000) and other possible costs would be very welcome: it would not only facilitate an immediate response to this emergency situation but would also contribute to reinforcing the Red Cross presence in this part of the world. For additional information please contact the Asia & Pacific Department of the Secretariat.

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