

SOLOMON ISLANDS: DROUGHT

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The Disaster

The current record-breaking El Nino phenomenon has resulted in a significantly reduced rainfall in the Solomon Islands throughout 1998, leaving many areas severely affected by drought. The Solomon Islands Government, which is suffering from serious financial difficulties, has undertaken relief activities throughout the year in the worst hit areas.

Many parts of the country are still affected by the drought. The Government has requested the Solomon Islands Red Cross (SIRC) to assist by providing supplementary food supplies to the three villages on Basakana Island, one of the worst affected areas in the Province of Malaita.

The small island of Basakana is situated off the northernmost tip of Malaita Island, one of the six main islands of the country. Basakana is 100 hectares in area and has a total population of 380 persons, or 60 families. Although everyone is affected by the failure of crops this year, it is the children who are most at risk.

There has been insufficient rain to plant crops of potatoes, the usual staple food, and in all likelihood planting will now be delayed until later this year. The crop will therefore not be ready until at least February 1999.

Government Action

The Agriculture Office of the Malaita Provincial Government conducted an assessment of the situation in April but the government has not been able to offer any assistance to those affected. After this survey, the Catholic Church responded by supplying sufficient rice for June and July but has indicated that it is unable to continue its support.

Following this, SIRC sent the Malaita Branch Field Officer to Basakana to conduct an independent assessment.

The assessment reveals a number of problems facing the community :

- w The population has increased significantly during the last few years
- w The limited amount of soil on this small coral island has become leached and infertile
- w The potato crop which was planted in February and March, and due for harvest in June and July, has died due to the prolonged dry weather
- w Food is in limited supply on the local markets
- w Rough seas have limited the community's access to fishing grounds.

If the food distributions are not continued, there is a strong likelihood that poor nutrition will lead to increasing health problems and susceptibility to disease.

Food distributions are needed until the next potato crop early next year. There is also a longer term need to educate the community in soil and crop management to reduce the risk of similar crop failures in the future. However, the plight of this small community has now outstripped the capacity of the government and of the SIRC to respond on their own.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The SIRC has drawn up the following programme of action:

^ Procurement and distribution of food supplies

Rice will be purchased by SIRC headquarters staff and will be transported by road and canoe to Basakana Island

Distribution, on the basis of one 20 kg bag of rice per family per month, will be carried out at monthly intervals, for a six month period, from August 1998 to January 1999.

^ Facilitation of community education in soil and crop management

SIRC will facilitate community training on Basakana Island to enable the community to improve the soil and cropping methods. This training will be conducted by Malaita Province Agriculture Officers, supported by SIRC Field Officers. The Field Officers will also carry out some basic Red Cross dissemination and promote Community Based Self Reliance concepts.

The SIRC has the experience and personnel to carry out this operation without the field involvement of Federation delegates. The Regional Delegation Suva (RDS) will offer advice and technical assistance through the Regional Disaster Preparedness Delegate and will be responsible for administrative and reporting procedures.

Needs

A total of **CHF 12,330** has been released from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to cover the costs of this operation. This amount, though not great, is of vital importance to SIRC in assisting it to alleviate the food shortages threatening this small community, and thus to fulfil its mandate in support of the most vulnerable people in its country. Cash contributions by donors to support this small but vital operation and at the same time replenish the DREF would be appreciated..

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department