



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
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الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

The value of National Societies supporting each other
Disaster response experts: Regional Intervention Teams (RIT)
By Manuel Rodríguez and Cristina Estrada in Panama City

Ashanta Osborne and Carlos Sejas are Red Cross volunteers. Ashanta, who is from Guyana, is responsible for HIV/AIDS programmes in her National Society and is also an expert in logistics and administration. Carlos, who is from Argentina, belongs to his National Society's Santa Fé branch and was involved in the operation to help people affected by the floods that hit the region in 2003. Both are RIT members.

In my case, I was selected immediately after the RIT workshop providing specialized training in logistics. My National Society accepted the request made by the Chilean Red Cross for me to assist in the relief operation after the floods in June," explains Carlos, as he calls his family to tell them that he will not be home for another month.

There are more than 300 RIT members in Latin America. The list of places where they have been deployed this year includes Argentina, Belize, Chile, Guadalupe, Guyana, Mexico and Panama. The names of RIT members such as Eric Martínez, Luciano Timerman and Miguel Ángel Cabrera are inextricably associated with the monitoring of operations to deal with the effects of the cold wave in Colombia, the volcanic activity of the Tungurahua in Ecuador and Hurricane Stan in Mexico.

So... what is a Regional Intervention Team (RIT)?

The regional intervention team is a Federation response tool, a network of human resources available at short notice and highly qualified in different areas of humanitarian work (water, finance, logistics, health, relief, telecommunications, etc.).

The members of the team "have received training in Federation standards to prepare disaster response and intervention. They belong to Latin American National Societies and are called into action at the request of National Societies affected by disasters," explains Stephen McAndrew, coordinator of the Pan-American Disaster Response Unit (PADRU).

PADRU is responsible for implementing this programme from its headquarters in Panama. "We have the capacity to deploy one or various members of the team to the affected area as the situation requires... There are currently five RIT members in Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Suriname, assisting in operations to deal with the effects of floods and volcanoes," he adds.

"The Federation field response system involving RIT deployment is an effective coordination tool and simplifies the work required to deal with an emergency successfully. As a result of RIT involvement in Colombia, where the National Society undertook enormous efforts in disaster reduction, response and rehabilitation, a constant feedback of information and working techniques was generated, paving the way for the mission," observes Miguel Ángel Cabrera, Director of Disaster Relief at the Chilean Red Cross. "Information and knowledge exchange is key to the work of an RIT," he adds.

In March, PADRU sent Felipe Del Cid to Tumbes in Peru to manage the flood operation. On the basis of his training as an RIT member in November 2004 and years of experience as a volunteer and programme coordinator for the Honduran Red Cross, Felipe was appointed to implement a plan of action benefiting a thousand families.

Prior to this deployment, 37 others had been made, 21 in 2004 alone. So far in 2006, 12 people have been deployed to assist in emergency situations caused by floods and volcanic activity and in cooperation missions in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Suriname.

A decade's experience of disaster response

The idea of having people in the region trained in disaster response was born in 1999, and the first training workshops were held in Bogotá, Quito and Tegucigalpa. Further RIT courses were held in 2001, 2002 and 2004, bringing the total number of trained RIT members in the 35 Latin American National Societies up to 245 (December 2005).

The first operation involving RIT deployment, promoted and coordinated by the Federation, was carried out in Costa Rica to deal with the effects of the floods that hit the country in September 1999. This was followed by flood operations in five states in Mexico in October of the same year and others for the floods and mudslides affecting the state of Vargas in Venezuela in December 1999, which drew the most attention regionally and globally.

There were further deployments of team members to Belize to assist with the Hurricane Keith operation, to El Salvador and Peru after the earthquakes of 2001 and to Argentina and Bolivia in 2002 and to the Dominican Republic in 2003 and 2004 for flood operations.

Specialization process

The need for National Society personnel with a better knowledge of Federation standards has resulted in the system requiring an increasingly specialized training process, so that it can contribute to strengthening the international response system.

"From another perspective, we appreciate the work of Carlos Sejas (RIT, logistics), which has proved enormously valuable to the disaster response operation in southern Chile. His efforts have spotlighted shortcomings in the National Society in the area of logistics and strengthened those elements already in place," comments Miguel Ángel on the experience of working with Carlos from Argentina.

In order to improve disaster response expertise and skills, various workshops were held, providing specialized training in areas such as water and sanitation, telecommunications, logistics and public health.

The role of RIT members is not limited to disaster response; they also contribute to the development of the Federation's response system. Traineeships are therefore promoted at PADRU on a regular basis for the production of specific documents and materials, such as guides to preparing contingency and response plans, protocols and training courses for operations support.

"In addition to the benefits of training, an RIT also provides an opportunity to exchange experiences, as part of a continuous process of hands-on learning, promote good practice and regularly update the system based on lessons learnt," explains Darío Álvarez, disaster management delegate and RIT programme coordinator. "The programme is based on information exchange and capacity building among National Societies... A good example is the Red Cross Society of Panama, which is proud to have become a donor, by facilitating the deployment of Eric Martínez to Mexico."

"Another added value of the team is its capacity for cultural integration, an essential attribute in a continent as varied and diverse as America. When RIT members work in places where neither Spanish nor English is the native language, their capacity to adapt is crucial," concludes Darío.

At the present time, Ashanta Osborne from the Guyana Red Cross Society is in Suriname; Diego Ruiz from the Colombian Red Cross Society is working in Peru, assisting the regional delegation in monitoring flood operations in Argentina and Bolivia; Carlos Sejas from the Argentine Red Cross is in Chile; Eric Martínez from the Red Cross Society of Panama is assisting the Mexican Red Cross in monitoring the Hurricane Stan operation* (2005 season); and Luciano Timerman, also from the Argentine Red Cross, is in Ecuador, assisting in the operations carried out by his National Society after the eruption of the Tungurahua volcano.

Miguel Ángel Cabrera spent a month assisting the Colombian Red Cross Society in a humanitarian aid operation benefiting over a thousand families. Carlos Sejas from Argentina is now assisting the Chilean Red Cross in implementing its own flood operation.