

INDIA : FLOODS

17 August 2000

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situation report no. 1

period covered: 11 August-16 August

Together with the Indian Red Cross Society representatives, a five-member Federation team, reached the Indian State of Assam on 16 August. The assessment of the situation started immediately. This report focuses on their initial findings in this most affected Indian State.

Contributions are urgently required to support this operation.

The context

More than five million people have been affected by floods as the south-western monsoon arrived early to north-eastern India. Reports of flooding in the state of Assam started coming in by late July. The situation worsened dramatically at the beginning of August when flash floods resulting from heavy rains in the Himalayas swept south, causing breaches in the embankments along many parts of the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, inundating the surrounding area. The combined death toll in north-east India and Bhutan is reported to be over 300 people. The worst flooding affected India's north-east state of Assam where, according to local authorities, over 3.5 million people were forced to flee their homes. The northern districts of West Bengal and Bihar have also been affected and flash floods have caused havoc in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh.

The rescue phase, during which the local governments and the armed forces were engaged in evacuating people to safety by boat and helicopter, is now over. Flood victims were relocated in temporary shelters - mostly in public buildings such as schools - but most people have already attempted to return to their villages as waters are receding. According to local Red Cross workers, these people are in desperate need of relief, as they have lost their homes, properties, crops and in some instances their cattle. Heavy rains have persisted, and there are fears that further flooding may be expected in the coming weeks since the monsoon is not expected to abate until mid-September.

Due to the inaccessibility of many areas which remain under water, detailed information on the extent of the disaster in each state has yet to come in, and the true scale of the humanitarian and economic impact is yet to be evaluated.

Latest events

Assam

A five-member Federation assessment team composed of a team leader, water sanitation specialist, health specialist, field delegate and information/reporting delegate accompanied by two representatives from the Indian Red Cross travelled to the state of Assam on 16 August. The team was briefed by senior local governmental officials (including the Chief Minister of Assam) and the leadership of the Assam State Branch of the Indian Red Cross. Assam is reported to be the hardest hit state in this year's floods, as 18 out of 23 districts have been affected. This state has endured three successive waves of flooding in recent weeks, although flash floods between 4 and 6 August caused the most extensive damage, rendering 3.5 million people homeless or marooned. According to the local authorities, 3,717 villages have been submerged and in some cases totally devastated and 4,431 square kilometres of agricultural land has been affected. Thirty two people lost their lives in the floods and subsequent landslides and 626 temporary camps for flood victims were set up - often in public buildings such as schools, but often simply on any high ground available. One hundred camps are still in operation while the others have been closed as villagers return to their devastated homes in order to try to rebuild their lives. According to the State Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation, local farmers, most of whom are already living under poverty line, have lost their main harvest and seeds. They will plant again only in October and wait for the next harvest which will not be ready until March or April 2001. The same population has been affected by recurrent floods approximately every two years for the last decade.

Although the rescue phase is over, the local authorities list health risks as a main concern, principally malaria and waterborne diseases. Even prior to the flooding, 30% of all cases registered in local hospitals suffered from waterborne diseases. The nutritional status of the affected population is also very fragile, thus making the resistance of people to diseases very low.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Assam •

The Assam State Branch of the Indian Red Cross has been distributing relief since the first floods hit the state in late June. They mobilised over 200 volunteers to carry out the relief effort in 14 districts, distributing mosquito nets, kitchen utensils, tarpaulins, blankets and clothing to the flood victims. The Red Cross is the only organisation which has assisted the local government in providing relief during this crisis. The Assam State Branch is quite strong. The Guwahati District Branch, for example, generates its own income and is basically self-sufficient. The main strength of this branch lies in its long experience of relief and health care activities and its strong volunteer base. The branch runs 5 maternity hospitals and out-patient clinics and organises training for nurses.

Next week, the joint Federation and Indian Red Cross assessment team will be visiting Dhubri district in the west, Nalbari district in the north of Guwahati and Marigon, just east of the state capital. During this trip, the team will also visit district branches and the regional Red Cross warehouse.

Outstanding needs

Although flood waters are receding, they have left trails of destruction and in some cases washed away entire villages. The population in the flooded areas is very poor and recurrent floods have lessened their capacity to cope with the present disaster. Malnutrition is common. The local Red Cross has confirmed that food remains the most immediate need as people need to support themselves

through to next harvest in May/April 2001. Malaria and waterborne diseases are endemic in the area but no cholera cases have been reported by the authorities so far. Wells have been contaminated and people have resorted to drinking flood water as their only source. Sanitation in this area is actually a general problem as access to clean water is limited even during the dry season and there is a definite need for water purification tablets and sanitation material.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The joint Federation and Indian Red Cross assessment team met with the local authorities in Guwahati, the state capital of Assam, and will continue to receive briefings from local officials at the district level while travelling in the flooded areas. WFP has an assessment team in the state, but has not yet responded to the disaster. Media interest in the disaster over recent days remains relatively high with interviews given by the Federation Regional Delegation in New Delhi to various international media including BBC World Service, BBC domestic radio, Australian broadcasting, Reuters and AFP. The assessment team leader has been interviewed by British broadcasting media, as well as various local media in Assam. Other team members have been interviewed by Reuters and AFP as well as Finnish and Icelandic media. Further interviews with major media services and local Indian press will be held once the team returns from the field.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

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