

# ***INDIA : FLOODS***

*22 August 2000*

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*Heavy rains persist in the affected Indian States and there are fears that further flooding may occur in the coming weeks since the monsoon is not expected to abate until mid-September.*

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## ***The context***

More than five million people have been affected by the floods in north and north-eastern India as the south-western monsoon started early. 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 caused by heavy rains in the Himalayas swept south. The flood waters in turn caused 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 of the flooding is in India's north-east state of Assam, where local authorities say over 3.5 million people were forced to flee their homes. The northern districts of West Bengal and Bihar have also been affected while flash floods have caused havoc in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh.

## ***Latest events***

On 20 August, local media reported that 350 people were rescued by helicopter in the north-eastern district of Dhemaji, as the flood situation in upper Assam deteriorated further. The victims were stranded in the middle of the Siang river - a tributary to the Brahmaputra - as it changed its course. The conditions in Dhemaji, in the grip of floods for more than two months, have deteriorated even further due to relentless rainfall in recent days. Although the situation in some other affected district is improving, the water level of the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries is reported to have risen in the last few days.

While Assam is one of the hardest hit states in north-eastern India, only 32 deaths have been attributed directly to the floods. In most of the 18 affected districts, the water levels rose gradually, leaving enough time for people to escape with their goods and animals to a higher ground. In other districts, such as Nalbari and Darrang, flash floods washed away crops and houses within an hour, leaving a trail of devastation. According to local authorities, 3,717 villages have been submerged and 4,431 square kilometres of agricultural land affected. The same population has been affected by recurrent floods approximately every two years in the last decade while tens of thousands of families have lost their land due to erosion.

As the rescue phase is officially over, 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 and people have very low resistance to disease.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent action***

### **Assam •**

The Assam State Branch of the Indian Red Cross has been distributing relief goods since the first floods hit in late June. Their emergency stocks have now been exhausted on the state level. The Assam State Branch mobilized over 200 volunteers to carry out the relief operation in 14 districts, distributing mosquito nets, kitchen utensils, tarpaulins, blankets and clothing to the flood victims. The Federation has been the only international organization assisting the local government in providing relief during the crisis.

Last week, the joint assessment team visited Dhubri and Nalbari districts. On Friday, the team was joined by three American Red Cross representatives who accompanied them in assessing the situation in Morigaon and Darrang districts. The team met local authorities as well as health and water sanitation officials and held co-ordination meetings with the Assam State Branch and its district branches.

From Assam, the joint assessment team will be travelling to Bihar on 23 August and to West Bengal after that.

## ***Outstanding needs***

The flooding caused extensive loss of agricultural land and standing crops. The impact of the floods varies widely from region to region, depending on whether there was a relatively slow rise in water level permitting people to shift their houses to higher grounds or flash floods caused total destruction of homes and cultivated land. The majority of flood victims have settled in temporary huts on top of embankments while others have constructed makeshift shelters close to their land which remains under water.

As people start returning to the water-logged areas, polluted water becomes a priority together with food shortages. The floods have further increased the vulnerability of the population whose coping mechanism was already weak. According to the authorities, malnutrition is prevalent in the State as 50% of the population live under the poverty line. Health assessments are yet to be made. The Assam State Branch has reiterated that food remains the most immediate need together with safe drinking water. Thousands of rural water points have submerged, forcing people to consume contaminated drinking water. Prevailing sanitary conditions pose another serious threat.

Many areas have been cut off from health facilities and many villages are left with no primary health care. An outbreak of Japanese encephalitis has been already registered in the eastern districts of the

State. Out of 104 reported cases, 45 have already resulted in death. The government has organised spraying against mosquitoes. Due to poor diagnostic facilities, however, all malaria cases are treated as cerebral malaria.

The Red Cross warehouses in Guwahati have been visited by some members of the joint assessment team. Due to their location, the warehouses were flooded too and are not operational.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

The joint Indian Red Cross/Federation assessment team has met local Red Cross workers and local authorities in Assam. The team will continue to receive briefings from local Red Cross branches and officials at the district level while travelling in the flooded areas. The team has coordinated the activities with the American Red Cross delegates, both in Delhi and Assam. The Federation team leader will meet the leader of the American Red Cross team while in Delhi this week, as well as representatives from relevant United Nations agencies in the region.

The assessment team has established contacts with stringers from all major media services. The team was interviewed by various local media in Assam, as well as by AFP, AP, and Reuters, the CNN, BBC international, Finnish and Icelandic media.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details.

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