

VENEZUELA: FLOODS

*Preliminary
Appeal No. 35/99
20 December,
1999*

***THIS PRELIMINARY APPEAL SEEKS CHF 4,460,000 CASH,
KIND, AND SERVICES
TO ASSIST 50,000 BENEFICIARIES FOR 3 MONTHS***

Summary

Responding to the disastrous floods and landslides which have struck 9 provinces in northern Venezuela, the International Federation is appealing for contributions in support of the Venezuelan Red Cross emergency relief operation in aid of the victims estimated to be numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has called the torrential rains and resulting flooding the worst disaster his nation has seen in half a century, and in response the Government declared a State of Emergency.

The Disaster

Over the last eleven days constant rainfall in Venezuela has caused flooding and landslides in the Federal District of Caracas, as well as in the States of Miranda, Vargas, Nueva Esparta (the island Margarita), Yaracuy, Falcon Carabobo, Zulia and Tachira. The downpour created rivers that overflowed their banks and swept through poor districts in the capital of Caracas, a city with a population of 6 million people, destroying hundreds of homes and turning streets into fields of thick mud strewn with tree trunks and boulders. The worst hit areas were those with shanty towns perched precariously on steep mountainsides where one third of the capitals residents live. Initial reports indicate over 7,000 people are missing and are presumed dead, but the death toll could climb much higher. Schools, banks and government offices were ordered closed and officials urged residents to stay home.

The Simon Bolivar international airport, 30 kms north of Caracas, is closed. The main highway linking Caracas to the airport was blocked and most of the main roads into the city are flooded, virtually cutting it off from the rest of the country.

Environmental degradation in river catchment areas in combination with the poor farming techniques and inadequate construction techniques have served to compound the impact of the disaster.

The extent of the damage remains difficult to estimate. Recent reports indicate that entire communities are submerged under water and mud, or have disappeared. Search and rescue and evacuation operations as well as the distribution of relief items are continuing. However, the medium and longer-term consequences of this disaster are also becoming more apparent.

The damage to infrastructure is creating severe transport and logistical constraints, making it difficult for the rescue units to come to the help of the most affected. Access to the affected area by road, air, or boat is almost impossible.

The Response so far

Government Action •

The Venezuelan Ministry of Interior, through the National Civil Defence Authorities, are coordinating the relief operation. Officials appear to have been overwhelmed by the magnitude and speed of the floods. The military has played a key role in the rescue efforts, and all forms of transport are being used to support the rescue activities. Hospitals, local and international airports, as well as military bases have been used as macroselters. At the moment, 48 helicopters from the Venezuelan Government and the United States are assisting in the relief efforts.

Appeals seeking support from the National Society and the international community have been launched in almost all the countries involved.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

In cooperation with Civil Defence Authorities, the Venezuelan Red Cross is assisting in search, rescue and evacuation operations and providing food, clothing, emergency generators and vehicles. Some 1,340 Red Cross volunteers are supporting the relief and rescue action focused on assisting the government in the ongoing rescue and search operations, transporting the injured for medical treatment and assisting people who have taken refuge in temporary shelters by providing food parcels, blankets, clothes, and other general relief items. The release of CHF 60,000 from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) has supported the initial phase of the emergency assistance operation.

A number of Participating National Societies have indicated readiness to provide financial or in-kind support as soon as an appeal is launched. Due to capacity constraints, the Venezuelan Red Cross cannot undertake tracing requests at this time, but the Federation will advise when they can begin. However, to assist in tracing efforts a toll-free telephone line has been established and more than 3000 calls have been registered, most of them seeking information on missing family members and friends.

Doctors from the Venezuelan Red Cross hospital, relief teams, and volunteers have been assigned to different areas of the country to support the humanitarian action. Approximately 2,000 food packages were distributed in the Vargas State to the most affected people.

The Federation Regional Information Delegate from Guatemala is in Caracas assisting the National Society, together with a Federation logistics delegate. A Colombian Red Cross delegate is also managing the supplies donated by the Colombian Red Cross which arrived by air. The multi-national intervention team will arrive over the next two days comprised of key response delegates from the region, originating from the National Societies of Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Santo Domingo.

Participating National Societies •

A team of seven American Red Cross disaster relief workers, composed of experts in logistics, communication, and mental health, have been dispatched to join the multi-national response to the mudslides and flooding, American Red Cross has also released USD 50,000, and has sent a shipment of 50,000 pounds of relief supplies including blankets, water containers, a generator, bed sheets, and comfort kits (hygiene items including soap, toothbrush, comb, and shaving material).

The Colombian Red Cross has made a direct cash contribution to the Venezuelan Red Cross, and has allocated stocks from its warehouse in Bogota, consisting of tents, mattresses, blankets, sheets, stretchers, kitchen utensils, lanterns, hygiene kits and clothes which have already been despatched to Venezuela. The Colombian Red Cross has also sent supplies from its warehouse in the province of Norte de Santander on the Venezuelan border. A lorry loaded with kitchen utensils, sheets, towels and clothes, driven by two Red Cross volunteers, left for Venezuela early Sunday (19 December).

The Netherlands, Spanish, German, Finnish, British, and Norwegian Red Cross Societies have submitted funding applications to their respective Governments, or have requested in-kind contributions which will be transported to Venezuela. The Spanish Red Cross has already sent a consignment of relief items, and a Spanish delegate is also assisting the National Society.

Other Agencies' Action •

UNHCR, PAHO, and UNDP have made cash contributions to the operation, and WFP and UNICEF have pledged technical sector specialist support. The US Embassy in Caracas has provided helicopters for search and rescue.

Coordination

The Federation is closely coordinating action with the Venezuelan Red Cross, as well as Participating National Societies, United Nations agencies (OCHA), and NGO's. In addition, the ICRC representative in Caracas has been contacted and kept abreast of events.

The Intended Operation:

Assessment of Needs •

In addition to the current assessments underway which will form the basis for the full appeal to be launched as soon as possible, a thorough needs assessment will be undertaken in early January.

Emergency phase •

The Federation and the National Society plan to provide basic relief items consisting of food, blankets, kitchen tools, drinking water, hygiene kits, and chlorine and medicines to the most vulnerable families during the next 3 months.

Red Cross objectives •

- to continue first aid and medical support to the shelters;
- to support feeding programmes to the homeless;
- to ensure supplies of drinking water;
- to ensure emergency shelters as well as clothing and blankets;
- to act as auxiliaries to the public authorities during the evacuation/emergency phase;
- to support longer-term rehabilitation needs such as repairs to houses.

Logistics •

The Federation will send a Logistics Officer to ensure an effective logistics operation, including tracking and reporting on relief supplies. Please see the attached Federation Shipping Instructions and specifications for non-food items for guidance on the consignment of in-kind contributions.

National Society/Federation Plan of Action

The Federation's preliminary Plan of Action is to assist 50,000 people (or 10,000 families) in six states over three months during this initial emergency phase of the operation. The Regional Delegation is maintaining contact with the National Society, assisting in the evaluation of needs and following up on any further requests of assistance. Two Federation delegates are now in the field supporting National Society operations, and five more delegates are due to arrive soon and will be assigned to help in each state.

Budget Summary

See Annex 1 for details of the Preliminary Appeal budget.

Conclusion

Despite improvements in the weather, the heavy rains, the floods and the mud slides in Venezuela are not yet over. This Preliminary Appeal is being launched to support the continuing efforts of National Societies throughout the region in meeting the humanitarian demands. Donors are urged to promptly respond to this Appeal in order to allow the Red Cross to capitalise fully on preparedness measures already in place and in support of the ongoing relief activities.

Margareta Wahlström
Under Secretary General
Disaster Response and Operations Coordination

George Weber
Secretary General

This and other reports on Federation operations are available on the Federation's website: <http://www.ifrc.org>