Distributions of relief goods are getting under way, thanks to a rapid response at national and international level. But more cash is urgently needed if the operation is to stick to its tight logistics schedule, dictated by the region’s extreme weather conditions.

The context

The north-eastern Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is battling with massive flooding along the main Siberian river, the Lena, and its tributaries. The rivers began overflowing in mid-May and in the ensuing weeks reached their highest levels for 70 years. The flooding was brought on after unusually low temperatures in the upper reaches of the river, which produced up to twice the normal snowfall and a two metre deep ice layer, were followed by a sudden rise in temperature and an extremely rapid snow melt.

The damage produced by such unprecedented flooding, multiple ice-jams and shoals of floating ice is enormous. As of 12 June, 13 deaths had been reported and an unknown number of people were still missing; 51,295 people were evacuated. Preliminary estimates put the damage at approximately 1,300 million roubles (CHF 300,000,000).

The Sakha Republic covers a territory of some 3,200,000 sq. km, one-sixth of Russia's entire territory. It has a population of 1,003,300, of whom some 350,000 live within the flood stricken area. The Republic is partially Arctic, with permafrost conditions. The main means of transport is by the River Lena, during a short summer navigation period. The nearest railway is 800 km away from the Republic's capital, Yakutsk. Air transport is often the easiest means of conveying goods, although this is both complex and expensive.
Latest events

Since the launch of the Federation appeal six days ago National Societies, ECHO and governments have announced contributions covering just over 30% of the total amount sought -- CHF 1,620,000.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

A Russian Red Cross (RRC) consignment of 20 tons of clothes, bed linen, and hygiene items have been transported from Moscow to the disaster area and are in the process of being distributed. This is the second consignment despatched by the RRC. Volunteers of the local RC Committee continue to deliver relief goods and collect donations for the victims.

Plan of Action

Since the Appeal was issued the RRC has worked further on the operational plan of action. The following timetable has been drawn up:

15th July:
Finalise details regarding purchase of assistance (either locally or in Moscow, depending on cost) and draft a tender for procurement of relief items. Finalise transport means, hire of helicopters/barges etc.

25th July:
Select suppliers of relief items; recruit up to 12 local relief administrators

15th August:
Assistance goods to be assembled in Yakutsk; team of monitors to be briefed

15th August-15th October:
Distribution of all assistance (hygiene parcels, bed sheets, water filters, blankets, shelter materials, food and clothing) throughout the affected areas until 15 October, when river navigation ends.

15th October-15th November:
Monitor effectiveness of operation and identify probable additional needs

Concluding Phase: November-December 1998
Finalise distribution of food and other aid when roads and rivers are passable (hardened with ice).

Co-ordination

The Russian RC Central Committee and Yakutia RC Committee are continuing to work together, and are receiving support from the Moscow delegation of the Federation. The Yakutsk RC Chairman, who travelled to Moscow to participate in preparing the Appeal, returned to Sakha Republic with a modem for e-mail to improve communication links between Moscow and the Republic (which is six hours ahead of Moscow).

The HOD and the Information Delegate from the Federation's Moscow delegation will visit the affected area north of Yakutsk from 1-6 July. Their visit will include meetings with the relevant authorities to discuss the implementation of the programme and co-ordination of joint activities, as well as enabling them to obtain a first-hand acquaintance with the situation. They will be accompanied by a logistics officer from the RRC Central Committee who will investigate the most appropriate methods of transport.

Outstanding needs

The response so far

The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) have provided 250,000 ECU (approximately CHF 435,000), the Norwegian RC has contributed NOK 500,000 (CHF 99,250), half of which has been earmarked to assist 500 victims of another flood along the Pechora River in appeal no. 18/98 situation report no. 1
Arkhangelsk Oblast and Komi Republic in North Russia. The Society made an earlier contribution of CHF 14,750 to Yakutia. The Icelandic RC contributed ISK 200,000 (CHF 4,154), USAID, USD 25,000 (CHF 36,000), the American RC CHF 22,425 and the Swiss RC CHF 10,000.

The British RC/DfID, German RC, Finnish RC, Netherlands RC, Swedish RC, Japanese RC and other National Societies have informed the Secretariat that they are currently considering and processing requests for further support.

Funds received so far - CHF 547,554 - is being used for purchasing and distributing assistance: food, bed linen, blankets, clothing, water filters, hygiene parcels and shelter materials.

Despite this healthy early response to the Appeal, a significant sum of money for the purchase of relief items is still urgently needed -- by 15th July -- if the emergency operation is to be implemented according to the plan of action.

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

The launch of the Appeal on 22 June was publicised by a press release distributed both in Russia and among PNSs. Media response has been good, with several representatives (including the BBC and CNN, plus Russian journalists) expressing interest in covering the situation in the affected areas.

**Contributions**

See Annex 1 for details.

**Conclusion**

Although the response to the Appeal has been positive, the short navigational period along the River Lena and its tributaries makes it imperative for assistance be distributed within the strict timeframe set out in the Plan of Action above. It is therefore crucial that sufficient funds be transferred as quickly as possible, in order to ensure that the 20,000 beneficiaries selected by the Red Cross as being most in need of help receive the scheduled relief items before the onset of winter.

The people of Yakutia are a self reliant population, but their resources and resilience are now stretched to the limit by the necessity of helping people in neighbouring villages who lost everything in the floods. Dwindling stocks of food and materials are becoming a problem for those close by the flooded areas as well as for those who were directly affected. The over-strained authorities have appealed to the Red Cross, among other agencies, to help meet people's basic emergency needs.

For further information, please contact the Desk Officer, Michael Schulz, Tel: (022) 7304 320.