

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: FLOODS

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Pressing rehabilitation needs are now the focus of National Society response to the victims of the floods, ahead of the cold winter months. Urgent requirements for outstanding household equipment and minor repair and reconstruction material must be covered, to prepare the vulnerable families for winter.

The context

Flooding caused by unseasonable heavy rains across Central and Eastern Europe claimed over 100 lives in the Czech Republic and Poland during July. Due to the scale of the flooding, the total losses and damage to communities are still not known. Much long term damage may not become apparent until after the winter and may necessitate the demolition of additional buildings in 1998. For this reason it is important that minor rehabilitation and reconstruction initiatives take place now, to prevent more serious and longer lasting damage in the future. Recent estimates issued by the Polish government put the figure at 10 billion Zloty (USD 3 billion) for Poland alone. The construction of houses for those left homeless by the floods is continuing, albeit with some delay, and it is expected that 1,900 families in Poland will be relocated before winter. This still however leaves several thousand persons who will be unable to return home.

On 14 July, the International Federation launched an emergency appeal seeking CHF 6,960,000 in cash, kind and services to assist 257,000 victims of the floods in the region. Following the distribution of emergency relief items during the initial phase, the Polish and Czech Red Cross are now focusing on the urgent rehabilitation and minor reconstruction needs of the vulnerable ahead of the harsh winter weather, and are coordinating their activities with relevant government and local authority bodies.

Latest events

Schools and public services continue to be affected by the aftermath of the flooding in Poland. Crops and livestock losses have seriously reduced family food stocks and income sources in rural

areas, and among farming communities, which have limited access to bank loans. A Polish government programme aims to assist 6,000 families in 25 districts with the provision of food, hygiene items, household equipment and construction materials. School children, students, farms and medical centres will also be targeted for assistance. At the end of September the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that 620 new houses had been handed over to flood-affected families. The government and charitable foundations within Poland cannot however meet all the needs of the affected population, despite loans from the World Bank and the European Investment Bank to a value of USD 200 million and ECU 300 million respectively, which are expected to come through at the end of October. Continuing external aid is vital.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Polish Red Cross •

To date, some 28,520 food parcels, 11,370 hygiene parcels, 6,000 sanitation parcels, 11,000 bed sheet sets and 16,500 blankets have been distributed in response to the appeal; a further 6,000 families have received bulk food and hygiene support. The National Society is continuing to respond to the food and hygiene needs of 9,000 families, although the focus is now shifting to a greater degree towards rehabilitation needs. The distribution of 21,000 household equipment sets to flood-affected families through 14 Red Cross branches is on-going. This programme seeks to facilitate the return to their homes and the rehabilitation of these families through the provision of basic household items.

During the summer, camps were organised for flood-affected children and continued at the beginning of September for those for whom the beginning of the school year was delayed due to flood-damaged school buildings. The Polish Red Cross is currently involved in working out a programme of assistance for the winter, targeting children from flood-affected, low-income families. Support will be given to children through a school canteens' project, involving the provision of free school meals and through the distribution of shoes and warm clothing for the winter months.

Czech Red Cross •

During September, additional relief requirements among the flood-affected population were met, through the distribution of drinking water, food items, insecticides together with dispersal kits, working gloves and basic household items (blankets, pillows, pillow cases, bed sheets, towels and dish towels) for those returning home. Distribution of items procured under a second ECHO contract, including bed sets, is nearing completion.

At the beginning of the month, Czech Red Cross summer camps were organised for children unable to return to flood-damaged classrooms for the start of the school year. While repairs took place to their schools, the children were able to begin their studies at a different location.

The Czech Red Cross is continuing to cooperate with the government and local authority bodies concerning rehabilitation and reconstruction initiatives to facilitate the return of persons evacuated from their homes. The two main groups to be targeted for this form of assistance are pensioners and low-income families with small children. Direct financial help for reconstruction through a coupon system for redemption in selected construction stores is planned, together with a contribution to reconstruction programmes. Information from some 20,000 potential beneficiaries has been received. Beneficiary lists will be prepared in line with specific criteria guidelines.

Slovak Red Cross •

The drinking water needs in rural areas of the Bratislava region continued to be covered by the National Society until the last week of September. A total of 584 children in rural communities in five regions were provided with an infant food parcel. Distribution was completed in September.

Hungarian Red Cross •

Local branches of the Hungarian Red Cross have completed two phases of food and hygiene parcel distribution to 500 vulnerable families in the affected communities.

Outstanding needs

Polish Red Cross •

Larger items of basic household equipment, such as heaters, refrigerators, ovens and beds, are still needed by those returning to their homes. In order to limit possible medical or health problems for the occupants of damp and damaged houses, it is essential that these are supplied before the onset of winter. Food and clothing support to children will also continue over the winter. The Polish Red Cross also seeks to continue food support to 9,000 families in the Bielsko Biala and Wroclaw regions.

During the initial emergency phase of the flood operation in July, Polish Red Cross emergency warehouse stocks were distributed to the victims. The National Society now seeks to restock the warehouses to ensure essential disaster response capacities in the case of future natural disasters.

Czech Red Cross •

The Czech Red Cross seeks to assist flood-affected families with the procurement of reconstruction materials for urgently needed repairs to their houses, through a voucher system, allowing access for vulnerable families to basic materials in construction stores.

During the flood operation, communication and administrative facilities of the National Society were stretched to the limit. New fax, copy and general office equipment is urgently needed to upgrade essential communication lines and to ensure future disaster response networks.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Both the Polish and the Czech Red Cross continue to coordinate their disaster response with central and local governmental authorities and other NGOs active in the region, to avoid any duplication of effort, and to guarantee coverage of outstanding needs. Following extensive international media coverage of the emergency phase of the floods and the Red Cross operation - including interviews with the Head of Regional Delegation by Belgian TV, German, Austrian and Hungarian radio and BBC English, Czech, Polish and Bulgarian language programmes - national media coverage is continuing, organised through the National Societies.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The winter will be particularly harsh this year for thousands of vulnerable in the flood-affected regions. Traditional income sources in rural areas have been threatened by flood damage, and damp houses pose a further health risk for those who have returned. Vital repairs need to be carried out now, to limit long term structural damage to buildings. Ahead of the cold winter months, the National Societies are focusing on urgent rehabilitation and minor reconstruction needs of the most vulnerable, particularly families with many children, the elderly and disabled.

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