

INDONESIA: HAZE/SMOG

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period covered: 28 November 1997 - 01 February 1998

The haze/smog that choked much of south east Asia cleared with the belated arrival of the monsoon. The Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia) has launched a health education campaign and is distributing leaflets and posters on preventive measures for the rural population in affected areas.

The context

Extensive land clearance in Indonesia, under tinder-dry conditions caused by long delays in the monsoon rains in South East Asia, led to gigantic forest fires in Sumatra Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Java and Irian Jaya. The vast cloud of haze/smog these fires produced created an environmental emergency in the region lasting from August to late October last year, and constituted a health threat to the population, especially the elderly and small children, in the affected areas.

The Federation launched an international appeal for CHF 265,000 on 3 November 1997 to assist the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia --PMI) in: carrying out a health education campaign for the general population on protection against haze and smog and on safe water and sanitation; providing advice and simple training to affected families on longer term care for persons with respiratory ailments; monitoring the health and food situation in affected communities; and providing early warning in the next dry season. The Red Cross objective is to safeguard the health of vulnerable groups during times of drought and forest fires, through the mobilisation and training of PMI staff and volunteers in Chapter and Branches to sensitise and educate affected populations.

Latest events

The smoky haze that choked much of South East Asia cleared with the onset of the Northeast monsoon season in November. The rains normally continue until late February. However, parts of Indonesia are affected by a widespread drought, caused by the El Nino phenomenon which is battering Asia, and the monsoon has so far brought less rain to these areas. The drought is seriously damaging the agricultural sector, which occupies more than half the economically active population in the affected areas.

The Asia Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) has stated that "the current El Nino event is possibly the largest climatic event in this century". El Nino involves a warming of the upper Pacific Ocean, causing severe drought and extreme flooding in East Asia and altering climatic conditions around the globe. The previous major El Nino event was in 1982-1983.

In addition, Indonesia is presently undergoing a major financial and economic crisis as well as political tensions.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The Federation opened an office within PMI's facility in January 1998 in order to assist the Society with the implementation of this operation. The office is staffed by a Federation Representative.

The PMI has moved ahead with implementing the Plan of Action outlined in the appeal, although some adjustments have had to be made.

Modifications to Plan of Action

Because of lessons learned in the initial stages of this operation and the current monetary situation in Indonesia, the original plan of action and the proposed budget items have been slightly modified to reflect these realities. The "impact of Haze on health" has been added to the training curricula. The experience from training conducted so far has shown a need for closer supervision and monitoring and, hence, the budget has been increased to cover local travel and travel related costs for the relevant Branches. However, the revised budget for the remaining part of the operation will remain within the appeal budget.

Training of Trainers

The programme relies on a multiplier or cascading approach. PMI Headquarters Training Division will train trainers in six training courses. These trainers consist of staff and volunteers from Chapters in affected areas. The trainers will in turn train volunteers in PMI Branches, who finally will train village health cadres.

The first course was held from 08-11 December 1997 for the provinces of Riau and West Sumatra, with a total participation of 22 persons. The second was conducted in South Kalimantan Province from 17-21 December 1997 with a total participation of 37 persons. Due to the holy month of Ramadan which occurred in January 1998 the remaining four training of trainers courses were postponed until February and March: East Kalimantan Province, February 23-26, with 40 participants, West Kalimantan Province, March 09-12, with 35 participants, Central Kalimantan Province, March 16-19, with 30 participants, and the Provinces of Jambi, South Sumatra and Lampung, March 28-31, with 42 participants.

After the conclusion of the first trainers courses, the Branches in the Provinces of Riau, West Sumatra and South Kalimantan are now training Branch volunteers, to be followed shortly by the training of village health cadres.

Health Education materials

A specific training curriculum was developed for this operation. It was modified after the first course when it was realised that the rural population had no idea about the impact of haze on health. Miniposters (146,000), leaflets (109,500) and posters (10,000) have been printed in the local language. They present through text and drawings simple information for household level prevention measures and environmental protection. More than 30 per cent of the printed materials have been distributed to Provinces where training has been conducted.

Achievements

The programme and the training curriculum proved to be effective during field testing with trainers in remote villages. The programme is well accepted. Positive discussions were held between NHQ, Chapters and Branches in connection with the implementation of this specific programme and other RC programmes. Dissemination of Red Cross principles and PMI programmes to the local community were in evidence and the level of activities in Chapters and Branches has also increased. Standard

procedures concerning disaster management reporting on haze questions have been formulated by the PMI for its Chapters and Branches.

Constraints

Not all Branches are as active as they should be. Nearly half of the Branches lack sufficient volunteers to implement the programme. Many Branches need to develop better reporting skills. Measures will be taken by the PMI to overcome these constraints.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

PMI is working with the relevant Indonesian government departments. There has been good coordination with the Ministries of Health and Education as well as the local governments to ensure that the PMI operation reaches as many of the population as possible, including school children.

Media

Red Cross activities continue to enjoy limited local media coverage. A more aggressive approach will be developed under this programme to improve knowledge of PMI activities and the public image of the National Society.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details. Thanks to generous support from the Australian Government (AusAID) through the Australian Red Cross and cash contributions from the German and Japanese Red Cross Societies, this appeal has been fully covered.

Conclusion

Although the air conditions have improved substantially and the haze and smog has disappeared there is still a pressing need for this programme. Lately, satellite images and aerial photos have shown renewed flares of forest fires in East Kalimantan and the Province has been declared on full alert. The Federation and PMI are monitoring developments carefully.

Besides educating the rural population in preventive health measures in relation to haze, this programme is continuing to monitor the health of the haze-affected populations and contains an early warning element, which should help cope with future similar emergencies.

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