

CHINA: EARTHQUAKE IN HEBEI PROVINCE

3 February 1998

appeal no. 3/98

situation report no. 2

period covered: 20 - 31 January 1998

Despite harsh winter weather that is slowing down operations, initial relief distributions by the government and the National Red Cross Society have met the most immediate needs of victims. The National Society, backed by a successful domestic fundraising campaign as well as Federation support, is preparing the next phases of relief assistance.

The context

A 6.2 Richter magnitude earthquake struck Zhangjiankou Prefecture in Hebei Province just before noon local time (0350 GMT) on 10 January.

Hebei Province has a population of approximately 53 million people, more than half of whom live in the industrialised south. The earthquake occurred in the mountainous tableland of the more remote and rugged north where many of the villagers farm and raise livestock. Extensive damage occurred in four of the five counties affected: Zhangbei, Shangyi, Kangbao and Wanquan Counties, with Zhangbei and Shangyi the hardest hit. A total of 1,824 villages in 37 townships suffered varying degrees of damage, 696 seriously. The difficult terrain and the wintry weather has hampered relief operations. Victims remain extremely vulnerable to the very cold weather and freezing winds that blow down from the Mongolian steppes.

Latest events

January is usually the coldest month of the year and this time was no exception. Since the earthquake, temperatures have steadily fallen - reaching minus 30° C at night last week. Most of the homeless have been moved into temporary shelters built with a wooden frame, stone, straw mats, and tar paper. The relief provided by the government and RCSC has met the most immediate basic needs of the victims for the time being.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The RCSC is continuing to provide medical care and first aid in the disaster area and has more than 200 paid staff and volunteers working there. Food, warm clothing, and emergency shelter supplies are being distributed through both the Federation-funded operation and the domestic operation of the RCSC.

As of 24 January, RCSC branches had collected over RMB 12,114,370 (CHF 2.2 million) in cash and kind for the national fund-raising campaign. The RCSC notes that this unprecedented fund-raising result has greatly encouraged the Society's members, and is also highly appreciated by the general public and government. The RCSC has established a special committee at headquarters for the operation. In late January, another working team, comprised of relief and finance staff, was sent to the area from headquarters to assist the local branches in procurement according to the Federation's Principles and Rules of Disaster Relief.

The Hong Kong Red Cross branch of the RCSC announced that more than HKD 30 million had been donated by the HK government and people. The HKRC has four staff assisting its operation. To date 6,000 coal stoves and 540 tonnes of rice have been distributed.

In addition to this disaster, the RCSC has been providing emergency funds and relief goods -- clothing, medicine, shelter material, food, and other assistance -- to Tibet and Qinghai Provinces where heavy snowfall from September onwards continues to place many at risk due to the cold and isolation. The RCSC headquarters is currently consulting with the Tibetan RC Branch and the local government to determine how to expedite distribution of supplies, as the extreme winter weather makes transportation and travel difficult and hazardous. A national fund raising campaign raised RMB 3.7 million (CHF 650,000) in less than 2 weeks.

In 1997, disasters in China caused the death of more than 3,200 people, costs 24 million dollars, destroyed 2.87 million rooms, and devastated 50 million hectares of farmland.

RCSC/Federation Plan of Action •

The Plan of Action was described in the appeal launched 20 January 1998.

Progress to date:

- { nearly CHF 100,000 of medicine and medical supplies are being distributed
- { blankets and heavy coats were collected and distributed
- { RCSC staff and local officials are preparing beneficiary lists for future distributions
- { tendering is underway for rice, flour, additional medicine, building materials, vehicles, and capital equipment
- { tenders have been sent out for prefabricated buildings to house RCSC posts and equipment to furnish them; staffing allotments and job descriptions are being prepared
- { recruitment of a Federation Representative has begun.

Information •

Media coverage continues. Newspapers around the world have run stories about the Federation/RCSC operation. The President of China publicly acknowledged the work of the International Federation and RCSC in a press conference on the disaster.

Outstanding needs

The appeal is covered, provided that pledges, in the form of applications by PNS to their governments and representing approximately 12% of the total, are made good. So far, however, only Japanese Red Cross funds have been received in Geneva for this operation. Cash transfers of pledges are urgently needed to keep the operation running at full capacity.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Military troops have begun pulling out of the area after providing assistance and constructing 10,000 temporary shelters. Several ministries of the Chinese Government were active in the disaster area shortly after the earthquake hit. The RCSC has closely co-ordinated its efforts in Beijing, at provincial and at local level, with the authorities.

No other international organisation has been granted access to the area. As in many natural disaster situations, access during the initial emergency period is limited to reduce the potential for chaos.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

This earthquake struck an area which was already vulnerable due to a poor harvest. The severe winter weather has affected operations and required the adaptation of relief plans to meet the changing situation. Through the National Society's vast network, thousands of RCSC staff and volunteers have been involved in fund-raising in their communities and otherwise participating in the relief effort. Continued support from National Societies around the world will ensure that the Society has the resources it needs to assist its beneficiaries in Hebei Province.

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