

AUSTRIA: TRAIN FIRE

15 November, 2000

Information Bulletin N° 1

The Disaster

Some 162 people lost their lives after a mountain train caught fire in a tunnel in the Austrian Alps, near the city of Kaprun (southwest of the city of Salzburg) on Saturday, November 11. The train was transporting skiers and people on their way to attend a snowboard competition on Kitzsteinhorn mountain. Eighteen (18) - people escaped the fire by jumping out of a train car window and making their way out of the tunnel. According to information received so far, the fire began at 09:00 local time (08:00 UTC), 600 metres after the train entered the tunnel at 2,400 metres above sea level.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The first team from the Austrian Red Cross (ARC) was on site at 09:25 and broadcast a red alert to all emergency forces in the Salzburg region. Very quickly, 297 ARC workers were on the scene, including 25 emergency doctors, 40 psychologists, 11 helicopters, 8 emergency units (including trucks and rescue equipment) and a soup kitchen. In the vicinity of the accident a field hospital was established, caring for the 18 people injured and later transporting them down into the valley.

In the valley a helicopter landing pad was established as well as another field hospital. When it became clear there would not be any more survivors, the ARC set up four different check-points to register the skiers who were in the area at that time. Besides asking for their names and nationalities the skiers were also asked if they had come to Kitzsteinhorn with people who might have been in the train. On the same day - November 11 - more than 2,500 skiers were registered and at 17:00 a list was prepared - in co-operation with the local authorities - identifying 85 persons who were on the train.

The Austrian Red Cross teams began providing psychological support to 150 relatives of the train victims who had remained at the scene of the accident. The ARC also arranged for the transport of the relatives down into the valley, where they attended a church service. The ARC workers continued their psycho-social support and provided them with warm beverages and blankets.

At 19:00 a representative of the ARC, accompanied by a representative of the local authorities, as well as a psychologist, informed the people who were still waiting for information, about the death of friend or relatives. This information was given in group meetings, during which questions were answered as well. As it became clear that identifying the dead after the fire would be impossible, the relatives decided to leave the area with the ARC providing transport back to their homes for those suffering from the trauma of the accident.

The ARC continues to provide care for newly-arrived relatives, and they are staffing the field hospital. The ARC participated in all official press conferences and gave hundreds of interviews to the media. The hotline (0043/662/8144-300) received more than 5,000 calls.

The efforts of the ARC have been acknowledged by national and international media, in particular the efficient and effective emergency management and co-operation among the involved organisations.

With many of the victims of German nationality, extra help came from the German Red Cross' Munich and Bavarian branches, who sent a mountain rescue team to Kaprun as well as a psychological support unit who accompanied family members of the victims to the site of the accident.

The ARC continue to care for newly-arrived relatives and to staff the field hospital. The efforts of the ARC have been acknowledged by national and international media, in particular the efficient and effective emergency management and co-operation among the involved organisations.

In her letter of condolence, Federation President Astrid Heiberg said: "our hearts go out to the victims, the bereaved and the community of Kaprun. The Governing Board has asked me to express formally on its behalf, through the Austrian Red Cross, deepest condolences to the families and friends of the victims. (...) We are proud of you, who immediately dispatched rescue teams and provided emergency assistance. We have learned that specialists from the Austrian Red Cross are now giving psycho-social support to the families and friends of the dead and injured. Your Society's rapid role in this vital task is fully in keeping with the best traditions of our great Movement."

Needs

The ARC and Austrian Government are effectively managing the operation, and at this time there are no anticipated further needs.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Martin Faller
Director
Europe Department

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