

# ***COLOMBIA: FLOODS***

*4 April 2000*

## ***Information Bulletin N° 2***

### ***The Disaster***

More than half of Colombia, or 22 of its 31 departments, has been seriously affected by floods, landslides, avalanches and ground swells (heavy seas) due to heavy rains during the last three months of 1999 and the first two months of this year. The continuous rains have been caused by the Pacific Cold Phenomenon, known as *La Niña*. Additionally, Hurricane Lenny hit Colombia's Atlantic coast and caused damage due to ground swells in three departments: Atlántico, Magdalena and Guajira. According to the Civil Defence this is the worst flooding in Colombia in the last 25 years.

An emergency was declared in five provinces: Cauca, Nariño, Huila, Putumayo and Valle, in the south west, in the Andean region and in the Atlantic area. The Government declared a Red Alert in the regions near the Cauca, Magdalena, Atrato, Patía and Sinú riverbanks.

Altogether, some 524 floods, 139 landslides, 28 avalanches and 6 ground swells have affected 769 municipalities in 22 Departments. The departments of Caquetá, Chocó, Atlántico, Magdalena and La Guajira are the worst hit: 59.830 families or 500,000 individuals, are affected. Of these, 70,000 have been evacuated and are now in temporary shelters. The socio-economic impact of the rains in the agricultural sector alone represents a loss of \$ 85 million. The Ministry of Agriculture reports 2,189,000 hectares in 18 provinces affected and 100, 000 tons of foodstuff lost. Among the buildings damaged are those of four Red Cross branches.

In March the rains diminished considerably giving the country a breathing space to prepare for the coming months. However, the respite was shortlived. On 25 March the rains returned: five persons died, 20 were injured and 600 families in the province of Santander were evacuated because of landslides.

The water levels of the country's two main rivers, the Magdalena and the Cauca, are rising alarmingly. The authorities are monitoring the situation and have alerted people living close to the river banks: 1,500 families are in the immediate danger zone.

According to the Meteorological Institute (IDEAM), heavy rains will continue until mid-June in the Andean and Caribbean regions of Colombia, with hurricane winds on the Atlantic coast.

### ***Red Cross/Red Crescent Action***

As an initial response to the emergency the Colombian Red Cross (CRC) mobilised over 5,000 volunteers from 22 Red Cross Department Branches and 60 Municipal Operative Units. Damages were assessed and the victims' needs were analysed.

During the Red Alert in the regions near Magdalena, Atrato, Patía and Sinú riverbanks the National Society carried out an assessment in co-operation with local and regional Emergency Committees

co-ordinated by the National Disaster System (*Sistema Nacional para la Prevención y Atención de Desastres*; SNPAD). The local committees participated in evacuating and temporarily relocating the people affected or at risk, and distributed relief items from the National Calamity Fund (*Fondo Nacional de Calamidades*; FNC). The Colombian Red Cross worked together with the Health Ministry in the areas affected by the rains, conducting Health Field Days and equipping health care centres.

During the emergency in the Caquetá, Chocó, Atlántico, Magdalena and La Guajira departments during the last three months of 1999, the Colombian Red Cross distributed food and non food relief items to 29,477 families or 170,164 persons in 18 municipalities.

Between 1st February and 8th March the Colombian Red Cross assisted 6,556 victims with 961 food parcels, 263 comfort kits, 217 kitchen sets, 940 sets containing a plate, a spoon and a mug, 436 sheets, 430 mattresses and 22 blankets. Volunteers have evacuated and re-housed persons whose houses were in the danger zone. Red Cross volunteers furthermore retrieved ten drowned bodies.

During the most recent emergency Red Cross branches participated in search and rescue, gave first aid, carried out a census and needs evaluation and distributed blankets and sheets.

The National Society branches are now preparing contingency plans. Each branch is reporting its anticipated needs for the coming months to the National Headquarters.

In addition to the Colombian Red Cross's own funds, the ICRC donated CHF 21,500 in kind. The following National Societies contributed to the operation with cash: Netherlands Red Cross, German Red Cross, American Red Cross, Spanish Red Cross/ECHO and Canadian Red Cross. The Colombian National Disaster System contributed CHF 35,200.

## ***Needs***

Based on its assessment, the Colombian Red Cross will assist in the delivery of supplies to 19,000 beneficiaries or 3,932 families during a three month period, in the following departments: Antioquia (667 families), Cauca (640 families), Cesar (255 families), Huila (417 families), Nariño (740 families), Norte de Santander (204 families), Tolima (371 families), Valle de Cauca (638 families).

The total cost of the operation is approximately CHF 500,000. The Federation has released CHF 100,000 from its Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF). As a result of Information Bulletin no 1, the Norwegian Red Cross has pledged CHF 80,000, the Canadian Red Cross CHF 40,000 and the Netherlands Red Cross CHF 73,000.

With DREF funding the Colombian Red Cross has purchased mattresses, sheets and blankets, plates and cooking sets, and protective equipment for the volunteers working in the operation, as well as basic radio equipment for its Municipal Units in the provinces mentioned above.

The Colombian Red Cross would welcome additional support from sister societies to enable it to carry out the operation as planned. It also needs to replenish its warehouses, in order to be ready for the next disaster. If, as predicted, the flooding continues, an international appeal will be considered.

### ***Plan of action***

The Colombian RC will assist the 19,000 affected families as follows:

- food assistance: two food packages for each family;

- non food assistance: kitchen, clothing and cleaning products kits, mattresses, sheets and blankets for each family;
- health and basic sanitation: health field days, safe drinking water, and medication.
- If sufficient funding were to be made available, the Society would provide rehabilitation support for the families.

The operation will be monitored and, when finished, evaluated by the National Society.

The Colombian Red Cross has 54,000 active volunteers and 2,450 employees in 31 Red Cross Branches, with 232 Municipal Operative Units and Support Groups. Its operations, although decentralised, are controlled and co-ordinated by its National Operations and Relief Office.

Peter Rees-Gildea  
Director  
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Santiago Gil  
Director  
Americas Department

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