

GEORGIA AND ARMENIA: DROUGHT

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The Disaster

A dry winter followed by a prolonged drought with temperatures into the 40s has devastated crops in southern and eastern **Georgia**. Normally temperate, this region which produces much of Georgia's wheat and sunflower crop is facing in places a total harvest failure. Grasslands have also been destroyed, meaning there will be little fodder for animals returning from mountain pastures - many will have to be slaughtered. Crumbling irrigation systems have done little to help. Initial estimates indicate that Georgia has lost half its wheat harvest.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have recently completed a needs assessment, concluding that there is a need for over 60 million USD to purchase 26,000 tons of wheat seed in order to replant 100,000 hectares of drought-stricken land, and 66,000 tons of food aid to help 696,000 people survive the winter. Poor response or late delivery of wheat seed could threaten next year's harvest as well.

Georgia continues to experience serious economic problems, and is facing widespread food shortage. UN food aid may not arrive until November, and the possibility of a rise in the price of bread would cause considerable hardship for the two million people already living in poverty. Already, vegetable prices are rising, hay for animal feed has increased in price four-fold, and the price of livestock is falling fast because they are having to be slaughtered.

Agricultural production in **Armenia** has been devastated by hot and dry conditions (above 40 C) in the spring and summer months. The drought has exacerbated ten years of widespread poverty and chronic economic decline, including, in the agricultural sector, persistent shortages of seed, pesticides, fuel and working capital and the declining condition of irrigation systems. Initial indications are that drought damage to crops has been particularly severe in five of Armenia's 10 regions (Ararat, Armavir, Gegharkhunik, Araghatsofn, and Shirak), where the 2000 harvest is forecast to fall sharply. The crop loss is estimated at USD 40 million. Of major concern is that drought conditions will continue, or that emergency seed supplies will not be available for the early-October planting, either of which will result in the loss of next year's harvest. The result will be lower food availability and rising food costs which, combined with the existing widespread poverty, will create serious and widespread, long-term food shortages among vulnerable groups.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Information about the impending crisis in **Georgia** was not available until recently, and necessitates urgent action. The Federation and the Georgian Red Cross will assist WFP to distribute over 21,000 tons of wheat, beans and oil for 225,000 people in Samtskhe Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli until the next harvest. These two regions in the south of Georgia have particularly suffered; decades of under-investment has left deep poverty, with the population largely relying on marginal subsistence farming alone. Kvemo Kartli suffered severely from the failure of the wheat harvest. Samtskhe Javakheti is a region which relies heavily on cattle, and the harvest failure will hit particularly hard if, as is likely, the cattle have to be slaughtered due to a lack of winter feed. As temperatures drop to minus 20 degrees with frequent electricity cuts, the winter promises to be especially hard for the people of Samtskhe Javakheti.

The WFP appeal aims to cover the affected rural population, while the Federation is planning to provide food for directly affected urban vulnerable groups. The vulnerable groups that the Federation has in the past assisted with food parcels (the lonely elderly pensioners and the disabled) will be hard hit throughout the drought-stricken areas and elsewhere. The Federation has recently undertaken a series of in-depth surveys, which indicate that the situation for the most vulnerable in Georgia was getting worse even before the drought. Other vulnerable groups include one-parent families with many children, and the families of workers dependent upon agricultural commerce, such as grain mills.

An FAO/WFP assessment team will arrive in **Armenia** shortly. In response to this crisis, the Federation and the Armenian Red Cross are considering to undertake a rapid food parcel distribution to groups known to be especially vulnerable. Subsequently, the Federation will undertake a series of targeted food parcel distributions to vulnerable groups, complementary to the UN appeal. In these efforts the Armenian Red Cross will utilize its well-developed disaster preparedness and social service networks to support the distribution of seeds and food parcels to the most vulnerable throughout Armenia.

In both countries the relief programme will be followed up with a disaster preparedness programme, linked to regional branch development and a rehabilitation programme.

Needs

There is significant concern among the UN and donor community about the devastating impact of the drought. The Armenian and Georgian Red Cross Societies, supported by the Federation, are one of the few humanitarian organisations in the region with the capacity and expertise to respond to such huge needs. The Federation has many years of relief programme experience in the southern Caucasus, and fortunately has retained the capacity. With timely support from donors and National Societies, the Federation will be able to act quickly and effectively in response to this crisis.

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