

# ***INDIA : FLOODS***

*8 August 2000*

## ***Information Bulletin N° 1***

### ***The Disaster***

Heavy rains arising from the seasonal monsoon in South Asia have led to extensive flooding across 4 States in north and north-eastern India leaving an estimated 2.5 million people homeless, hundreds dead or missing and thousands of villages marooned amidst the floodwaters. Road and rail links have been severed in many areas and the Indian army and air force have been deployed to airdrop food and rescue stranded villagers.

On 8 August, the situation worsened following flash floods which left large areas in the State of Assam inaccessible. Embankments in places along the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries were breached leading to the large-scale displacement of the local population, many of whom are currently sheltering on the remaining embankments or surrounding high ground. Although the rains have abated over the past two days and water levels are beginning to recede most rivers continue to flow above danger levels.

Whilst the monsoon rains began early this year (late June), there are widespread fears that the situation may well worsen as the monsoon is predicted to continue throughout August and September.

#### *Himachal Pradesh*

Flash floods caused by heavy rains in Tibet, struck Himachal Pradesh in the early hours of 31 July. River levels rose dramatically, destroying 17 major bridges and 51 foot bridges on the Sutlej river and at least 50 km of road has been wiped out by the river at various places. Three districts close to the border with Tibet were worst hit and the district of Kinnaur remains cut off. The ensuing floods have rendered other parts of the State inaccessible and have caused extensive damage to property, besides claiming 115 lives. Indian Air Force helicopters have evacuated over 300 people affected by the flash floods and have air-dropped 48 tonnes of relief material.

#### *Assam*

Flash floods on 8 August caused extensive damage across Assam, claiming 35 lives and rendering 1.6 million people homeless or marooned across 16 States. Power lines have been washed away and road and rail communication has been disrupted in several parts of the state. An official in the state's flood control department said all rivers in the province were running more than 1 meter above the danger level

at many places. Though the water level of the Brahmaputra in the upper reaches has been gradually receding, it continued to rise in the lower stretches, engulfing fresh areas in Dhubri, Barpeta and Goalpara districts.

According to official reports, 140 relief camps have been opened in 14 districts of the state. The armed forces have rescued over 5,000 stranded people. The Army has also provided cooked food and medicines in some of the worst-hit areas while air force helicopters continue to drop food. Reports are emerging of rising incidences of water borne diseases including malaria and gastro-enteritis. A State government medical bulletin released on Monday said at least 34 people had died due to encephalitis in the eastern district of Dibrugarh in the past five days.

#### *Bihar*

Flooding has effected 16 districts across northern Bihar. Several major rivers, including the Ganga, Kamlabalan, Kosi and Bagmati are flowing above the danger level at a number of places. Floods have claimed 44 lives so far. About one million people have been displaced, 1,015 villages inundated, 4,000 houses have been destroyed and road and rail links washed away. Reports say crops valued at 84 million rupees have been damaged.

Indian Air force has dropped 16 tonnes of food stuff, medicines, and other essential commodities. At the moment, the Army M-70 helicopters are delivering 25 tonnes of chura (beaten rice) in the flood-hit areas where people are marooned due to the flood waters. A transport aircraft will deliver Army boats to be used by the Army personnel in carrying out flood relief measures. About 100 divers have also been called to rescue marooned people and help in the relief and rehabilitation work.

#### *Arunachal Pradesh*

Seven people have died following flash floods on Sunday, 6 August, caused by heavy rains in Nepal. Two major bridges across the River Siang were destroyed severing road communications across much of the State.

#### *West Bengal*

Extensive flooding has been reported in the north of West Bengal affecting a number of districts including Maldur and Jalpajuri. The rivers Torsha, Mansai and Diana are flowing above danger levels at several places. A number of areas have been inundated after several riverside embankments breached. The State authorities fear a confluence of the Raidak and the Sankosh rivers at Baravisha in Kumargram. A change in course of these rivers may wash away many villages. The district authorities have started relief work and are attempting to restore communications where main roads have been damaged.

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

Over the past month, the Indian Red Cross Society (IRC) has been assisting the victims of the flooding according to the varying Red Cross capacities in each State.

#### *Assam*

Despite limited material and financial resources, Assam State Red Cross branch together with 16 district branches out of a total of 24 have been actively responding to the floods. Volunteers have been mobilised at State and district level to complement relief efforts undertaken by the Government and the armed forces. Thousands of flood victims who have been rendered homeless have been temporarily housed in public buildings such as schools and colleges and Red Cross volunteers are supporting this process where they have the capacity - helping to provide food, cooking utensils, clean water, clothes, bedding and other commodities. Relief activities are being carried out on an ad hoc basis, with distributions targeted at the most vulnerable.

When the flooding began in late June, the Assam State Red Cross branch rapidly distributed the existing emergency stocks of food and non-food relief items from its warehouse in the State capital in Guwahati. Additional supplies were requested from the IRC headquarters in Delhi and a consignment of supplies comprised of non-food relief items including cloth sheeting, assorted clothing, cooking utensils and shelter materials was despatched by rail from the IRC regional warehouse in Calcutta. In addition, South Asia Regional Delegation released CHF 10,000 for the procurement of relief supplies locally in Assam. Some of these funds have been spent on transportation costs and the local purchase of mosquito nets and tarpaulins which have already been distributed.

Logistical difficulties have hampered relief activities considerably. Red Cross teams have been unable to reach thousands of people who remain marooned in their villages or on embankments without any assistance. Access to many of the worst affected villages has been impossible as many roads remain impassable and some areas of the State remain submerged under three feet of water despite reports that the floodwaters are receding. Consequently, until the floodwaters recede throughout the State, most of the IRC relief activities will remain confined to the vicinity of Guwahati district.

On 8 August, a Federation relief delegate was despatched from Delhi to Guwahati in order to carry out a rapid needs assessment in collaboration with the Indian Red Cross.

#### *Bihar*

The Bihar State Red Cross branch has been monitoring the level of flooding across the State since late June when eight districts were already affected. During the seasonal monsoon, 26 out of Bihar's 55 districts are prone to flooding. Currently, 16 districts in the north are affected and the Bihar State Red Cross branch in Patna has been providing limited relief supplies to district branches. Following a request for assistance to the Indian Red Cross headquarters, consignments of non-food relief items have been despatched in July by rail to Patna from the IRC regional warehouses in Calcutta, Haryana and Madras. These items were largely comprised of cloth, cooking utensils, bedding and shelter material including tarpaulins and tents. A further request for assistance has since been made to the national headquarters. Volunteers from district branches have been working closely with the local authorities to provide relief assistance to displaced people sheltered in public buildings. They have also been active in raising funds and supplies for the relief effort at a local level.

#### *Arunachal Pradesh*

Due to the relatively sparse population residing predominantly in the hills, flooding in Arunachal Pradesh has not had widespread humanitarian consequences. Indian Red Cross intervention has been nominal and has largely comprised of assistance at branch level where volunteers have been raising support from local communities to assist some 2,500 displaced people who have been accommodated in temporary shelters by the local authorities.

#### *West Bengal*

The West Bengal State branch has requested food and non-food material assistance from the IRC headquarters in anticipation of the flooding and a needs assessment is currently underway in the northern districts.

#### *Himachal Pradesh*

Three district branches of the Himachal Pradesh State Red Cross branch are supporting the State Government relief effort in the flood affected areas, assisting with relief distributions and organising temporary accommodation for people who have been rendered homeless by the floods. A truckload of non-food relief items despatched from the IRC regional warehouse in Haryana arrived in the State capital of Shimla. These supplies have already been distributed as part of the Government relief effort along with other items sourced locally. Further requests for assistance from the IRC headquarters are dependent on a local needs assessment currently being undertaken. Unlike Assam or Bihar, the flooding in Himachal is not persistent or widespread and the situation may well normalise within the next two weeks.

## *Needs*

The Indian Red Cross Society has been actively engaged in relief efforts in all of the flood affected States. Response to the floods has been rapid, although available financial and material resources have been limited and logistical difficulties have hampered access to the worst affected areas. All State branches have requested food or non-food assistance from the IRC headquarters and in some cases this assistance was provided as early as mid-July. Further requests for material and financial assistance from the State headquarters have been made and the Federation is awaiting the findings of an initial assessment currently underway in Assam prior to deciding upon a course of action.

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