

INDIA: FLOODS IN WEST BENGAL

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The Disaster

Over the past week, heavy monsoon rains have caused a second wave of floods that have swept across a vast and densely populated area of the Indian state of West Bengal, affecting over 14 million people and claiming more than 400 lives. So far, a total of seven districts have been declared flood-affected. Although flood waters are slowly receding in the northern districts, the situation in the south of the state remains critical as water levels continue to rise in many areas. Thousands of victims are marooned in regions that are completely inaccessible and rescue efforts are slow as a result of a shortage of motorised boats. It is estimated that over six million people have been without access to clean drinking water for several days as many tube wells are underwater and pumps have been shut down in many towns because of power cuts. Several incidents of looting and violence were reported with relief items failing to reach the flood-affected areas because of submerged road and rail links.

According to the figures recently released by the Indian government, the number of villages inundated in West Bengal stands at over 6,000. Crop and cattle losses are estimated at more than USD 155 million with damage to infrastructure totalling USD 22 million. In addition, some 800,000 houses have been destroyed or severely damaged by the floods.

This second wave of floods came at a time when West Bengal was just beginning to recover from the flooding that struck in August. West Bengal and other states including Assam, Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh experienced extensive flooding caused by the seasonal monsoon rains less than two months ago. These previous torrential rains and flash floods had already affected more than 10 million people. This time, the sheer scale of the disaster has once again overwhelmed the response capacity of the local authorities and the situation may deteriorate even further in the coming days if rains continue to fall in the region.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

A team consisting of two Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) representatives and two Federation delegates was deployed to assess the situation in West Bengal immediately after the first reports on the extent of the flooding were issued on 13 September. The disaster has prompted a swift, although modest, response from the IRCS. Food items, relief goods and 8 rescue boats have already been

dispatched to the flood-affected districts which are currently accessible by road. The IRCS is working in close co-operation with the state and district authorities in charge of the overall co-ordination of the ongoing emergency relief activities.

The West Bengal branch of the IRCS is allocating all its resources to assist the flood-affected population. At present, the following food items and relief goods are being dispatched from the IRCS warehouse in Calcutta to the flood-affected districts: 5,000 kgs of rice; 3,300 kgs of emergency rations, 276 litres of cooking oil, 38 rolls of PVC sheeting, 87 tents and 27 kgs of calcium hypo chlorine. Further relief supplies, comprising mostly non-food items such as shelter materials and kitchen utensils are in the pipeline and will be distributed to the affected population as soon as road access to the affected areas becomes possible.

The assessment team continues to monitor the developments in the field very closely. In the light of the latest events in West Bengal and the massive humanitarian needs, a revision of the current plan of action outlined in the existing assistance programme for the victims of the August floods, may be required.

Needs

The local authorities and armed forces have been rescuing and evacuating people and distributing relief assistance. However, to meet the existing needs, rescue boats, food supplies, clean drinking water, shelter materials, medicines and cooking utensils are all urgently required. Although food stocks are available in India, it is currently impossible to carry out large-scale distributions of relief supplies as many communities remain completely cut off by the floodwaters. Thousands of people have had little access to food or potable water over the past week. Meanwhile, many of those who have been rescued are still lacking basic shelter and access to medical care. Local authorities are emphasising the need for basic health care and rehabilitation of housing at a later stage.

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