

INDIA: FLOODS IN WEST BENGAL

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This Information Bulletin focuses on the response to recent flooding in West Bengal which is taking place in the framework of the Request for Assistance no. 19/2000 to assist 200,000 flood victims in India

The Disaster

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. To date, it is estimated that over 15 million people have been affected. More than 800 people are now feared dead and eight districts have been declared flood-affected. In addition, large areas of Calcutta were flooded several times over the last two days as a result of a high tide in the Bay of Bengal, leading to a counter flow of water upstream, with subsequent flooding of the Hoogli river.

Although there has been a slight improvement in the northern districts of West Bengal as flood waters start to recede, the situation in the south-east remains critical with many areas still completely cut off. Rescue efforts continue day and night, but resources are too limited and millions of flood victims remain stranded. The West Bengal government has started to take urgent steps to bring drinking water to the flood-hit people in the districts. According to the local media, arrangements are being made to take water by tanker and poly packs to remote flood-affected areas. Army helicopters continue to airdrop food to marooned communities. Meanwhile, reports of cholera, dehydration and water borne diseases are starting to emerge.

Losses are currently estimated at over USD 680 million, including damage to infrastructure and housing and crops and livestock losses. In view of the scale of the disaster, the governor of West Bengal is calling upon the central government to declare the floods a national calamity.

This second wave of floods came at a time when West Bengal was just starting to recover from the previous wave of flooding in July and August which also struck other states including Assam, Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. During this period, torrential monsoon rains and flash floods affected more than 10 million people.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) and the Federation are responding to this disaster under the existing assistance programme for the victims of the August floods. A full request for assistance to assist 200,000 beneficiaries was launched on 25 September 2000. In the light of the latest events in West Bengal and the scale of humanitarian needs, a revision of the current request for assistance and plan of action will be required.

A senior officer from the IRCS and two Federation delegates were deployed from Delhi to West Bengal immediately after the first reports on the floods emerged on 21 September. Based in Calcutta, the delegates continue to assess the situation and to provide crucial support to the IRCS. The West Bengal state branch of the IRCS is mobilising all available resources to assist the flood-affected population. However, logistical difficulties in reaching some of the flood-affected districts continue to hamper relief efforts. In addition, the overwhelming scale of the disaster has overwhelmed the limited resources of the district branches.

Food items, relief goods and 8 rescue boats have already been dispatched to those districts which are accessible by road. The first consignment of supplies sent from the IRCS warehouse in Calcutta included 5,000 KGs of rice; 3,300 KGs of emergency rations, 276 litres of cooking oil, 38 rolls of PVC sheeting, 87 large tents and 27 KGs of calcium hypo chlorine. A second consignment of relief supplies has just been dispatched from New Delhi and is expected to arrive in Calcutta between 30 September and 1 October. This consignment includes the items specified below:

Item	Quantity
Rice	10 MT
Cloth sheeting	5000 pieces
Kitchen sets (<i>including 1 plastic bucket</i>)	3,700 units
Tarpaulins	3,500 pieces
Assorted garments	2,000 pieces

In addition, the Orissa state branch of the IRCS is sending 10 MT of rice from its buffer stocks in Bhubaneswar to West Bengal. The Federation relief delegate is assisting the state branch to devise a plan for the immediate dispatch and distribution of all of the items in the pipeline. Meanwhile, the Federation logistics delegate is working closely with the IRCS headquarters in New Delhi to facilitate the rapid procurement of additional relief supplies urgently needed in the field. Procurement of the following items which are based on needs for a two month period, is underway:

Item	Quantity	Remarks
Tarpaulins	8,000	4,500 for distribution 3,500 to replenish a loan taken from IRCS buffer stocks
Kitchen sets (<i>including 1 plastic bucket</i>)	8,000	4,300 for distribution 3,700 to replenish a loan taken from IRCS buffer stocks
Chlorine tablets	2,400,000 units	For 8,000 families for 2 months

Needs

The local authorities and armed forces have been rescuing and evacuating flood victims, as well as 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. Many of those who have been rescued lack 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. The Federation medical co-ordinator, due to arrive in West Bengal in early October, will carry out a health needs assessment in the flood-affected districts. It is clear that there is a need to procure three additional new emergency health kits (NEHK) in order to stem the spread of waterborne and vector-borne diseases.

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