

CAMBODIA: FLOODS

3 August 2000

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The Disaster

Earlier than normal, heavy rains have swept through Cambodia and into the Mekong River watershed area of Southern China, Laos, Northern Thailand, Northern Vietnam. The series of storms have brought more than twice the normal rainfall over a greater area than at any time in the past 40 years.

The excessive rainfall has caused extensive localised flooding with the Mekong River breaching its banks. Nine provinces and the Municipality of Phnom Penh have been impacted by flooding. Thirteen deaths have been already attributed to flooding. The official government estimates are: 39,549 affected families; 105,978 hectares of affected cropland and 4,799 flooded homes.

The Royal Cambodian Government issued warnings of the impending Mekong River flooding in July and almost all communities took the necessary precautions including moving families and livestock to safer elevated areas, safeguarding possessions and securing available food resources.

There are currently 15 safe areas in two provinces (Kampong Cham and Kratie) and Phnom Penh sheltering some 3,705 families or 7,943 individuals.

Since these heavy rains and river flooding occurred 45 - 60 days before the normal seasonal floods, most of the crops have not yet been harvested. In many areas, fields are still flooded and in some locations they are as much as 2 metres under water.

Although the flood waters have begun to slowly recede, communication and access are limited and in many cases villages and communities are isolated. The country may continue experiencing storms and rainfall in the Mekong watershed area. The normal floods season in Cambodia begins in mid to late August and lasts through September. But even if Cambodia reverts to that seasonal norm, with the current high water levels and ground saturation, the impact will be devastating.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

With the assistance of the International Federation, the Royal Government National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM) and the Cambodian Red Cross Society (CRCS) established closer links and formalised their relationship through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on 2 August 2000. This MoU affirms and defines co-ordinated information gathering and exchange, establishment of

joint damage/needs assessment teams and assessment procedures and practices. With the Federation and CRCS support, the NCDM will conduct regular information sharing meetings open to all IOs, NGOs and other agencies involved in disaster management, response or relief activities. The MoU also includes the agreement on geographical division of areas to be assisted by the government or the CRCS.

The NCDM and CRCS continue to co-ordinate response plans on daily basis in order to avoid duplication of service and to ensure the needs are identified and met. This collaboration will extend to the provincial level where the government and the Red Cross will duplicate the co-operative spirit in assisting the most vulnerable victims.

The CRCS, NCDM and the Federation conducted a joint field visit to Kompong Cham Province on 1 August to gather information and identify needs in six of the most heavily impacted villages and one of the safe areas. Through discussion with many victims, village leaders and other local officials, it was observed that the predominant issue was the economic impact of crop loss and the topic of food security both short and long term. Many villagers face the prospect of incurring new or additional debt to sustain them through the flood until another crop can be planted and harvested. Victims have begun to sell or consume chickens, ducks and other livestock normally used for income generation, to supplement their crop harvest.

The CRCS has continued to share information and discuss ongoing developments with the United Nations World Food Program (WFP). The establishment of assessment teams to identify and address the needs of dislocated families in the Phnom Penh area is underway. The Federation also shared the observations gathered about the economic impact and food security situation during their field visit to Kompong Cham.

The CRCS has received an official government request to assist the most vulnerable victims in 6 provinces covering 14 districts and Phnom Penh covering 3 districts. They began distribution of food (mainly rice), clothing and plastic sheeting for shelter and home repair on 21 July and launched a local emergency appeal on 27 July. Attached tables provide information on emergency relief distributions carried out to date by the NCDM and CRCS as well as planned CRCS distributions.

The latest CRCS emergency relief distribution took place on 3 August in Kandal Province for 1,050 most vulnerable families. The Federation and the representatives from the Embassies of Cuba, India and Philippines participated in this distribution. The CRCS also began distribution of the ECHO donated emergency household kits, purchased earlier this year as an emergency stock. Fifty seven most vulnerable families received the kits including 21 essential household supplies and relief items and the remaining 2,953 kits will be distributed according to the needs identified during the forthcoming assessments.

The CRCS and NCDM will begin a joint detailed damage/needs assessment on 7 August. Much of the area to be assessed is either covered by water or is a quagmire of mud impassible by any motorised vehicle making the process laborious and time consuming. The procedure is to keep the teams in the field and progressively make assessments and deliver the required assistance until all identified needs have been addressed. All information is shared with WFP as well as with a number of interested Diplomatic Missions and UNDP.

The CRCS also liaises with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and assists in identifying sanitation and hygiene issues in safe areas as well as the needs in isolated villages and communities. Data on the impact of the flooding on community health and community assets are also gathered. The main areas of consideration are related to hygiene, sanitation, vector borne diseases and access to water in safe and flood affected areas. In particular, the impact on community assets, such as water points, will be assessed. This assessment may take considerable time since the roads have been left impassible by the flooding.

Close co-ordination has been established with other agencies such as MSF, Action Against Hunger (AAH) and Partners for Development (PfD) in order to enhance the quality of the assessment process. To date, there have been no reports of changes in the health status of the local communities.

Needs

The Royal Government of Cambodia has not yet declared this situation an emergency at international level and has not appealed to the international community although assistance from the international community in Cambodia was requested by the NCDM in the Emergency Response Group Meeting (ERG) on 28 July. Accordingly, the CRCS has not requested the Federation to launch an international emergency appeal. However, the government needs remain the same as indicated in the Federation Flood Alert issued on 26 July.

International Federation will continue to closely observe and monitor the development of the situation, participate in the CRCS emergency relief distributions and support further assessments as needed. The Cambodian Red Cross Society continues to receive emergency assistance in rice, clothing, dry food and cash for the emergency phase based on the local appeal launched by Madam President on 27 July 2000.

Further information about the development of the situation will be provided through the Federation Information Bulletins.

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