

SRI LANKA: FLOODS

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The Disaster

South west monsoon conditions over Sri Lanka have been unpredictable since May 2000 and have brought disruption to parts of the country. Although monsoon rains were below average in June, some areas experienced heavier rain and more thunderstorms than usual. Monsoon conditions in July were less harsh and almost all areas had below average rainfall. However, the south west monsoon became active in August with higher than average rainfall in the latter part of the month.

Lower atmospheric pressure during the third week of September finally brought widespread rain particularly to the south west parts of the island. Since then, heavy rain over the last two weeks of September has caused extensive flooding in several parts of the south and western provinces of Sri Lanka, leaving thousands of families homeless and large numbers of houses and property damaged. Two deaths have been recorded and in some areas road and rail links have been severed. Although heavy rain was experienced in the earlier part of September, the late monsoon did not cause serious problems until 20 September when the situation worsened causing flash floods in four Districts. On 30 September and 1 October, the situation worsened further as a result of heavy rain followed by flash floods. The latest rainfall on 2 October measured 14.9 mm. in Galle, 14.9 mm in Matara, 82.2 mm in Kalutara and 66.1 mm in Gampaha (source department of meteorology).

Nearly 17,000 people have been displaced in the Districts of Galle, Matara, Kalutara, and more recently Gampaha. Navy boats have been used to evacuate thousands of families in Galle District, the most affected District to date. Some roads in the area have been nearly 4-5 feet underwater, severely affecting vehicular movement.

The Flood Monitoring Unit of the Irrigation Department of the government of Sri Lanka has reported some rivers flowing at 5 feet above the normal level. On 30 September, the government's Meteorological Department warned that rains can be expected to continue during the inter monsoon period prior to the onset of the second monsoon season in October and November, and might continue therefore until December. It has recommended that government and non-governmental institutions should prepare themselves for humanitarian response. The forecast is for "fairly heavy rainfall accompanied by strong winds during the inter monsoon period".

The government's Social Services Department has co-ordinated government response in the form of dry food rations and emergency shelter supplies through its own officials, as well as through Red Cross branches and volunteers and other village level voluntary organisations. The Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) has been in constant contact with government departments at both national and district levels, and has co-ordinated relief assistance needs through a joint needs analysis with the Director of Social Services at national level.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Sri Lanka Red Cross volunteers have been actively assisting Divisional government offices with relief assistance from the earliest point in the disaster, rescuing people, giving first aid to those affected, supplying and distributing dried and cooked food, and transporting displaced people to safer areas. They have also been maintaining relief camps in places such as temples, churches and school buildings where displaced people have been sheltering.

Red Cross branch officials and volunteers have also been conducting assessment surveys to identify the most vulnerable families and areas where supplies are still required and are not met by government and other relief agencies. Quotations have been taken for procuring appropriate relief items, on the basis of discussions regarding actual needs that have been conducted with affected families.

Sri Lanka Red Cross officials and volunteers at national headquarters and branches have been in constant dialogue with government authorities such as the Director of Social Services, and District and Divisional secretaries within the five affected Districts. The National Society has also dispatched relief materials such as kitchen utensils, bed sheets, sleeping mats and clothes from its national relief warehouse to the Galle District branch for distribution in collaboration with the local government officials.

Needs

Initial identification of the most vulnerable is presently being undertaken by Red Cross volunteers in conjunction with government officials and it appears that the total of affected families who are in need of additional support number 6,000: 2,000 in Galle, 2,000 in Matara, 1,000 in Kalatura and 1,000 in Gampaha Districts.

The Director of Social Services has also informed the Red Cross Society that assistance for the repair and reconstruction of damaged houses will be a priority as the government may not be in a position to undertake such work.

The Sri Lanka Red Cross Society has drawn up an implementation plan for the relief phase which includes provision of a package of dry food and other relief items to 6,000 identified vulnerable families, consisting of rice, dhal, flour, sugar, tea, matches and soap. The quantities envisaged for each packet will sustain a whole family for 2 weeks (cost CHF 19 per package). A further relief kit is also to be supplied to those families who are sheltering without basic items and is to include sleeping mats, bed sheets, towels and kitchen utensils for each family (cost CHF 34 per kit).

As requested by the government's Director of Social Services, the SLRCS also aims to provide roofing sheets for restoring shelter to damaged houses to identified families and a needs assessment is to be completed within 7 days.

In order to prevent the spread of water borne and communicable diseases, the Red Cross Society plans to begin an immediate health education campaign in 3 languages to prevent people in flood affected areas from consuming water from the flooded rivers, and to inform affected communities about how to purify and maintain clean water sources. Volunteers have also planned to undertake a water purification process in flood affected areas as precautionary measures to prevent water borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. A programme for chlorination of wells and water sources has been planned. An appeal for assistance to flood victims in Sri Lanka will be launched in the coming days.

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