

CHINA: SNOW DISASTER

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The Disaster

Beginning on 31 December, 2000 a series of blizzards hit a number of rural areas of Chinese Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia causing severe hardship over large swathes of the north eastern parts of the region.

Latest reports from the local Red Cross indicate that the worst affected areas are in the north eastern Prefectures of Xilingele, Xingan, Hulunbeir, Chifeng and Tongliao. A total of 19 counties within these prefectures have been seriously effected by what the local authorities are calling the worst storms to hit the region in 50 years.

Combined snow and sand storms continue in many areas, and more than 60 cm (24 inches) of snow mixed with sand from the Gobi desert has reportedly fallen in some areas in the first few days. The daytime temperatures have dropped to below minus 30 Celsius, further exacerbating the situation. The storms have stranded tens of thousands of herders and their livestock on the grasslands that make up much of the affected region.

While detailed information on the effects of the disaster are only now emerging due to the severe disruption in communications, it is clear that thousands of people are at risk from the extreme conditions. The local Red Cross branches are currently sending out assessment teams to the worst effected areas. However, due to the disruption to the road system it will be some time before detailed information emerges of the full extent of the disaster. One Red Cross worker, for example, needed three days to travel the 100 km from his branch to the regional capital of Hohot due to drifting snow. The Inner Mongolia branch of the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) has received initial reports of 26 people killed and a further 17 missing as a direct result of the blizzards. Many severe cases of frostbite have been reported due to the extreme cold, and the local Red Cross has released locally donated stocks of medicines to their mobile medical teams in an effort to treat as many cases as possible.

The Inner Mongolia Branch of the RCSC estimate that up to 1.35 million people have so far been affected by the disaster, and that a total of 400,000 people may need immediate assistance. In addition, with 19.97 million hectares of grazing land now under deep snow, more than 46,000 livestock have died (out of a total of 10 million head of cattle) which represent the main livelihood of the affected population. The severe drought that affected much of the northern part of China during the summer of 2000 seriously weakened the livestock's ability to survive further hardships, and officials expect the latest

disaster of a sudden and heavy snowfall combined with the freezing temperatures will dramatically increase the numbers of livestock lost to up to one million head.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

CHF 100,000 has been released from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to start the procurement of the essential relief items. When the first reports of the disaster reached the RCSC headquarters in Beijing, 1,000 blankets were immediately released from their Regional Disaster Preparedness Centre in the neighbouring Liaoning Province to assist the Inner Mongolian Branch. Local reserves of disaster preparedness stocks within the region itself are extremely low following the assistance provided to the victims of last years drought.

The Red Cross Secretary General of Inner Mongolia is currently co-ordinating the collection of data from the assessment missions undertaken by the affected branches. The Inner Mongolia Red Cross will start the process of mobilising funds and in kind donations to assist the most vulnerable in the disaster area.

The Federation delegation in Beijing will support the National Society in the implementation of this first phase of the operation. The Federation and the Red Cross Society of China will continue to monitor the situation closely and keep the international community regularly informed of developments and required assistance.

Needs

The main priority needs are for quilts and food to help the population combat the freezing temperatures. So far the local governmental authorities in the affected areas have requested 70 million yuan (US \$8.5 million) to provide immediate help to the victims. While the RCSC has already been able to immediately release limited stocks of winter blankets to the region, it has requested some additional financial assistance from the Federation to help supplement its own efforts.

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