

SOUTH ASIA: Drought

27 April 2000

Information Bulletin N° 02

The Disaster

Large parts of Southern Afghanistan, the province of Baluchistan in the remote south-western region of Pakistan and several States of India are experiencing a rapidly worsening drought, caused by poor rainfall over the past three years and an almost total lack of rainfall during the recent winter. The next substantial rains are not due until October.

The terrain of the drought stricken areas is arid plateau, flanked by ranges of barren hills. Those worst affected are scattered across remote mountain valleys in small cluster villages. They depend for their livelihood on their livestock which includes sheep, goats and camels. The lack of rains means that local water sources are drying up and there is very little vegetation for grazing. This has led to substantial loss of livestock.

There is evidence that mortality rates among the population are rising, particularly among the vulnerable, including children. The general health of the population is declining, with rising levels of malnutrition due to the poor diet on which many people are subsisting. Moreover, as people and animals share the same water sources there is an increase in the risk of diseases spreading through contamination.

The economic impact of the drought is likely to be severe. Approximately 40% of the world's poor live in South Asia which has a total population of over 1.4 billion people. According to the World Bank, under usual circumstances some 50 percent of children under five in South Asia are malnourished. A severe drought will exacerbate existing problems of poverty, and have a devastating effect on the lives of the most vulnerable. Market prices for livestock have already decreased, and farmers have not sown the main annual wheat crop because of the lack of rains. A shortage of wheat flour is reported in the local markets and rationing has begun. The economic status of the affected communities is expected to decline and families will invariably be further caught up in a cycle of debt in order to feed family members.

The coming months will be critical: If there are no rains to replenish vegetation, livestock losses will increase. The authorities in Pakistan and India have provided some food, and medical and veterinary assistance in a limited number of districts, but there is no information at this stage of action by the Afghanistan authorities.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

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A comprehensive needs assessment is urgently required in the three countries. So far, only a limited assessment has been done by a joint WFP, FAO, UNICEF team in Pakistan. The Federation is mobilising a prototype Field Assessment Coordination Team (FACT) to undertake a thorough needs assessment in the affected areas. The team will link into existing needs assessment efforts. In Afghanistan it will take into account the existing preliminary assessment carried out by the Afghanistan Red Crescent Society and the Federation Country Delegation and ICRC Delegation. In Pakistan and India the team will carry out the assessment together with the respective National Society.

The team will be composed of six to eight members, including two relief generalists, two water /sanitation specialists, and two health/nutrition experts. The assessment should last about 10 to 14 days. The team will be divided in two: one part will carry out the assessment in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the second in India. The South Asia Representative of ECHO, which has already been notified of the eventuality of a Federation appeal, will join the assessment.

Based on the FACT mission's conclusions and discussions with Governments as well as other agencies, the Federation will consider launching a drought appeal for South Asia. The Pakistan Red Crescent Society have already indicated that an appeal will be positively considered. The Indian Red Cross Society is discussing the need for an international appeal with the Government.

Activities are being coordinated with UN agencies and NGOs, as well as the ICRC, and planned interventions will form part of a consolidated effort.

Background - Afghanistan

Information is being gathered together with ICRC, and will be made available as soon as possible.

Background - India

The Government of India estimates that at least 50 million people are affected in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Wheat, grain and dairy farmers are the worst affected. There is increasing evidence that :

- nutritional levels are decreasing
- access to water is becoming more difficult -- government and private tankers are now regularly supplying fresh water.
- there is a drastic reduction in crops from the last harvest, and poor indications of seed availability for the next harvest, due in September- October. Livestock is suffering badly, many animals are dying and sale prices have halved
- migration is taking place from the two worst affected states to Punjab
- food prices have doubled in many areas - from 5-6 rupees per kilo to 10-12 rupees
- fodder prices have increased.

Background - Pakistan

The Baluchistan branch of the Pakistan Red Crescent Society (PRCS) has established good relations with the local government, tribal structures and NGOs in the drought affected areas. The branch has been monitoring the drought closely and has carried out some initial vulnerability assessments in the south east district of Khudzar, in particular in Arangi sub district, and in Kharan district in the south west. In March, a joint Federation/PRCS assessment team visited the same areas in order to further clarify the situation.

Although the government has indicated that communities in the worst affected areas may have to be relocated to lower lying regions, most people are reluctant to leave their ancestral lands.

Needs

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Needs

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