

# INFORMATION BULLETIN



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies  
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge  
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja  
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

## ALBANIA: HEAVY SNOWFALLS

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*This Information Bulletin is being issued based on the needs described below reflecting the information available at this time. Based on further updates and details from assessment reports, or should the situation deteriorate, the Federation will consider international support through an Appeal. At this stage no in kind contributions are being requested. Donors are encouraged to make financial cash contributions, as needed items are available on the local market. A DREF allocation (CHF 75000) is also requested to replenish Albanian Red Cross emergency relief stocks, as these have been completely depleted during this first emergency phase.*

### The Situation

On 16 December 2001 the north-eastern area of Albania was blanketed with heavy snow. In the weeks that followed the severe storms delivered heavy snowfall continuously almost every day, and within a short time the entire area was cut-off from the rest of the country. Such a severe snowfall had not been experienced since 1985, and dealing with the situation has proved to be a major challenge.

The affected region includes four prefectures (out of Albania's twelve), with a population of some 125,000 people. Since the snowstorms began the situation has not changed. The large snowfall combined with low temperatures has created unexpected difficulties for the population of these areas.

It has been difficult to collect accurate information from the affected areas as the internal means of communication have been completely disrupted. Some of what has been learned comes from the prefecture offices located in the district town centres which are in fact located at a considerable distance from the isolated and blocked mountainous areas most affected. Nevertheless, the information from the local authorities already shows several deaths, as well as houses destroyed due to the weight of the snow on their roofs.

The latest forecasts show that the weather situation is not likely to change until 15 January 2002, and the low temperatures will create further problems. However, it is the lack of sufficient food that is the main problem for the population which is striving to survive.



The unexpected inclement weather caught residents both surprised and unprepared. The snows have severely exacerbated an already difficult situation. For the past sixteen years these areas have not had hard winters; at the same time poverty has not permitted residents to take appropriate measures to cope with such a situation. Many lack sufficient financial resources to buy reserve food supplies. Therefore, for the moment food is the immediate concern for the population of these areas.

Typically, wheat flour is stored during the summer and used to make bread in winter. Reports indicate that the wheat flour reserve is almost exhausted. Health is another problem which the isolated population is facing: located in remote areas, the inappropriate infrastructure does not allow them to benefit from health services. Each passing day sees the situation of the affected population becoming increasingly difficult.

According to the information provided by the authorities and from Red Cross sources there are serious problems with the electricity in the affected areas. Temporary power outages are a concern which have engulfed the entire country in the last few years, but what is currently being experienced in these affected areas is a complete blackout. In addition to this, the low temperatures have caused the water pipelines to freeze and break.

On 24 December 2001 the government set up an emergency group headed by the minister of Local Authorities. Logistical support was offered for all food assistance pledged for the affected area. Among other things, one of the major tasks of the government has been to keep all the national roads open. Although this has proven to be very difficult due to the lack of proper equipment, in general the roads have been kept clear. However this is not the case for the internal roads linking the remote communes and villages with the main town centres.

On 8 January 2002 the government declared a state of emergency for the four prefectures of Kukes, Diber, Shkoder and Lezhe, with the deputy prime-minister appointed as head of the emergency group. According to the government decree this group will co-ordinate all assistance. The main characteristic of the current situation is the need for a quick and effective response. Although it is very expensive, the government has provided helicopters for the transport of food supplies. Road transport supplies have also been organized. Additional food remains the outstanding need as it has not been available either from government agencies or from other non-governmental agencies (NGOs) in the country.

The government has publicly commended the large contribution made by the Albanian Red Cross in response to this situation. Television broadcasts have clearly shown Red Cross relief items being sent by helicopter and truck to the affected area.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent Action***

The Disaster Preparedness (DP) policies recently adopted by the Albanian Red Cross have allowed for a fast and effective response to this crisis. In accordance with the DP plan, a permanent relief stock with food and non-food items for 8,000 people is available at all times. This stock was immediately put into use. The result is that the Albanian Red Cross, using governmental logistical facilities, was able to provide 83 percent of the food and non-food items which have been distributed to those affected (155 metric tons (MT) of the total of 185 MT)<sup>1</sup>. A total of 10,000 beneficiaries received these items. In addition to the helicopter transport mentioned above, the national society used its three trucks to send relief items to the affected area, but unfortunately due to the severe snows they eventually became blocked and have remained at their destinations.

The DP plan also provided for the installation of a wave mail system, enabling the national society to communicate with all twelve Red Cross branches even when normal phone service breaks down. Nevertheless, communicating with the most remote settlements remains a challenge. Reports from local Red Cross branches indicate particular difficulties in these villages. Even at the best of times they face many difficulties because of poverty and the lack of proper infrastructure. An estimate from the authorities issued on the 3 January 2002 shows that at least half of the population of these areas needs prompt intervention as soon as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> food items: wheat flour, canned meat and vegetables, oil. non-food items: soap and blankets

The national society has set up an operation group in which every member has a separate task. Contacts were established immediately, with the emergency group already established by 24 December 2001 in order to co-ordinate the assistance to be offered to the affected population and to exchange information.

The local authorities offered additional information about the most affected areas and the national society co-ordinated the work with the emergency group for the proper distribution of food and non food items in order to guarantee a fair and normal distribution. Local Red Cross branches were involved in this operation along with local authorities.

The national society organised and accompanied the relief items to the villages where the beneficiaries were located. On these occasions Red Cross staff were also able to collect useful information regarding the most urgent needs facing the population of these isolated areas. As far as food is concerned, it has emerged that wheat flour and canned meat and vegetables are the most urgently needed items for the population. These items can be purchased on the local market, which would allow for a quick intervention.

## ***Needs***

While the initial first phase of this crisis can be considered to have been dealt with, funds are needed to purchase some 150 MT of wheat flour, canned meat and vegetables (equivalent to CHF 80 000); items that are available on the local market. The Albanian Red Cross emergency DP stock proved to be vital in this crisis. However this has now been completely exhausted. There is an urgent need to immediately replace this stock and cover the other related costs.

## ***Conclusion***

The Albanian Red Cross has responded both quickly and effectively to this emergency. The Albanian Red Cross DP relief supplies proved to be of vital importance, clearly illustrating how crucial it is to replenish them as soon as possible. It is essential that these stocks are in place for any future emergency such as landslides, which many are predicting as an eventual consequence and imminent risk directly related to these snowfalls. And there is much that remains to be done. Assessments are currently ongoing, and further information will be provided on a possible second rehabilitation phase. This would examine issues such as the destruction of houses, risk of landslides and so on. Those affected by these snowfalls were vulnerable even before this crisis. They will continue to require assistance and support in the months to come, and the Albanian Red Cross intends to continue to be in a leadership position to be able to help provide this assistance.

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*All International Federation Operations seek to adhere to the Code of Conduct and are committed to the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (SPHERE Project) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. For support to or for further information concerning Federation operations in this or other countries, please access the Federation website at <http://www.ifrc.org>*

### **In Brief**

- ◆ heaviest snowfalls in sixteen years
- ◆ four prefectures affected
- ◆ all communications cut-off
- ◆ most vulnerable located in extremely remote areas
- ◆ power blackouts, burst water pipes
- ◆ shortage of food
- ◆ Albanian Red Cross has provided 83% of relief supplies
- ◆ Government has provided helicopters and trucks to transport relief
- ◆ Albanian Red Cross relief stocks now severely depleted
- ◆ imminent risk of landslides
- ◆ cash contributions urgently needed

*For longer-term programmes, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal.*

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