

# 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

## *SRI LANKA: DROUGHT 2002*

*10 June 2002*

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*Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) Allocated: 0*

**This Information Bulletin is being issued based on the needs described below reflecting the information available at this time.**

*Two assessments in March and May 2002, carried out jointly by the Sri Lankan Red Cross and the Federation (including a detailed food basket assessment) confirm that there is an acute shortage of food and water in the Hambantota division of Sri Lanka.*

*A new drought relief appeal, based on the two recent assessments is scheduled to be launched in mid June 2002. It aims to extend the food ration component to highly vulnerable existing and new areas, and also incorporating a small but effective water provision component.*

## *The Situation*

There seems to be no end in sight for families affected by long term drought conditions that have gripped Southern Sri Lanka's Hambantota division for two-and-a-half years. More than 400,000 people, some 80 % of Hambantota's population, have been affected by the drought. The situation remains very difficult, and Red Cross assessments in the affected areas, carried out jointly by the Sri Lankan Red Cross Society (SLRCS) and the Federation, during March and May 2002 confirm the continuing needs of the affected population.

As farming is the most common source of income in the area, the failure of up to four successive crops, has left many people in urgent need of both food and water. The price of staple food has risen by approximately 50%, and in the most desperate cases families are substituting tree leaves as vegetables.

Some are living on diets that consist of just a very small amount of rice and vegetables. The average ration in one of the assessed villages is below any standard, representing around one third of a standard full ration both for energy as well as protein. Due to the substantial lack of food and water, malnutrition and diseases such as diarrhoea are increasing, and the Government health officers have confirmed that the average birth weight is decreasing.

The Ministry of Social Services (the Government's line Ministry for natural disasters) has also received an update of the latest assessment from the SLRCS and the Federation's South Asia Regional Disaster Response Delegate who have just completed the latest joint assessment in May. This assessment

included discussions with local Government Agents, Government doctors and health officials, and village level Gram Niladaris.

The Government at district level has requested assistance from the SLRCS. There has also been a request from the WFP asking the SLRCS to assist medical health centres in Hambantota with distributing supplementary food rations for pregnant women and children.

Farming, the foremost economic activity of the region, is mainly rain fed (very few farmers have access to irrigation) and is practised as “chenna” cultivation (a slash-and-burn system where the scrub is burnt off and a crop is planted quickly when the first rains arrive). Both, the south-west and the north-east monsoons have failed to reach the drought-affected areas for over two-and-a-half years and the farmers have not been able to grow a single crop over this period. There are two agriculture seasons in Hambantota District: Jala, from April to August and Maha, from September to March.

The drought over the past five cropping seasons has hugely impacted upon the food security at the household level. Wells and tanks (water bodies) are dry. Malnutrition is rising and doctors are noticing a general drop in the birth weight of new born infants. Incidences of diseases like dengue fever, malaria and diarrhoea are being reported more frequently.

Even though some localised drought affected areas received some rain in early May, the rain was insufficient and too short-lived to alleviate the drought conditions. In fact, the rain may have exacerbated problems as desperate farmers quickly summoned all of their resources, and pawned valuables with the local moneylenders at steep interest rates to invest in seeding their lands. Unfortunately, there was no more rain and the newly-grown crop once again withered away.

Adults or heads of households in the villages of Hambantota are either migrating or travelling long distances in search of manual labour. Animals are being sold off because farmers cannot feed them any longer. The drought has also stressed the wildlife in the nearby wildlife resort of Udawalawa, and wild elephants straying out of their jungle habitation in search of water are endangering people’s lives and properties.

Described as an arid region, climatic conditions in Hambantota are very different to most of the rest of Sri Lanka, which otherwise gets sufficient rainfall. Situated very close to the equator (about 6.15 degrees N latitude), the region receives a lot of sunlight, and experiences a high degree of evaporation of whatever rain it gets. A shortage of rainfall means that more water evaporates from drought affected areas. The region experiences two spells of monsoon rain – called the south-west (falling in April/May) and the north-east monsoon (November/December).

The following is the most recent indicative rainfall data pertaining to Hambantota collected from the Sri Lanka Meteorological Department:

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| July 2001      | No rain during 28 days. 1 day of light rain at the end of the month                        |
| August 2001    | No rain during 30 days. 1 day of very light rain.  |
| September 2001 | No rain during 20 days. 2 days of Light to moderate rain in the end of the month           |
| October 2001   | 20 days without rain. Light rain for 7 days.   |
| November 2001  | 18 days without rain. Moderate rain during 3 days and light to moderate rain during 3 days |
| December 2001  | 25 days with no rain. Moderate rain for 1 day and light rain for 4 days                    |
| January 2002   | No information available   |
| February 2002  | 24 days with no rain. Moderate rain for 1 day and 3 days of light rain                     |

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| March 2002 | 4 days of very light rain.  |
| April 2002 | 18 days without rain. Moderate rain for 1 day and 2 days of light to moderate rain. |

Classification of rainfall in mm:

- |                              |                         |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Light 0-12.5              | 4. Fairly heavy 50-100  |
| 2. Light to Moderate 12.5-25 | 5. Heavy 100-150        |
| 3. Moderate 25-50            | 6. Very heavy 150- over |

Hambantota experiences a drought situation when the rains are below 75 per cent of the normal rainfall. Hambantota District has not had above average rainfall since 1996, and has suffered two severe droughts in 1998 and 2001.

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

In *February 2002*, the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) and the International Federation completed the final distributions of food items (rice, flour, lentils and sugar) to a total 3,716 families in a separate drought operation (appeal no. 25/2001) which had been ongoing since August 2001.

In *March 2002*, the Regional Disaster Response Delegate conducted a joint assessment with SLRCS of the continuing and future needs of the most affected populations in Hambantota District after the recent programme had finished. That assessment confirmed that the families who had been receiving the targeted Red Cross rations over the duration of the six month programme experienced notably improved conditions compared to families that did not receive assistance. Whereas some reserves were available in SLRCS assisted households, no reserves were available in the other households.

The March assessment recorded serious conditions continue to face many areas. Farmers who had gambled in the early part of the rainy season last November reported losses after severe crop failures. In the most affected areas and as already mentioned, farmers have increased their indebtedness, lost another crop of vegetables, and have experienced diminishing labour opportunities as irrigation ponds have also continued to dry out.

Family consumption habits have changed, and in many cases been reduced to two meals per day. Children had increasingly been sent to relatives in other regions, when possible, due to the lack of adequate food and water.

As the food security situation has been worsening in recent months the Federation and SLRCS in mid-May 2002 conducted a detailed food basket assessment. The second assessment, during this year, concludes that the food and water needs of the affected population need to be met urgently.

The assessment was also joined by the Spanish Red Cross Delegate in Sri Lanka, and 50 SLRCS volunteers who undertook a door-to-door survey of 100 randomly selected families in two drought affected villages.

The Red Cross volunteers were paired off, and used a system whereby they visited a house and after that visited two annexing houses on the left side and two annexing houses on the right side. Approximately twenty percent of the population was interviewed, giving the survey a low chance for error. The daily food ration for each family was registered over a three day period.

In the village of Bondaginya the average ration per person was as follows: rice 220 grammes, dal (lentils) 8.5 grammes, oil 1 gram, dried fish 1.5 grammes, fish 3 grammes, vegetables 50 grammes, tree leaves 50 grammes, flour 3.5 grammes, manioc (a root from which one can make flour) 5.6 grammes,

potato 6 grammes. Most of the families live on rice and vegetables, or tree leaves alone. This represents around one third of a standard full ration both for energy as well as protein and is below any standard.

The other village which was assessed, Andarawewa, was targeted for distribution by the SLRCS in March, and seems to be better off as a result. Rations per person per day: 250 grammes of rice, 1 gram of oil, 2.8 grammes of dried fish 13,5 grammes of fish, 57 grammes of vegetables, 15 grammes of tree leaves, 17 grammes of flour 9 grams of manioc and 11 grammes of potato. This represents a more varied ration with a slightly higher nutritional value, but it is still well below the Sphere Standard. It is expected that without assistance, this village will fall back to the level of nutrition similar to the first village were no distributions took place.

The average water consumption was 2.5 litres per person for drinking and cooking. For washing, people go to those tanks where water is still available (average 6 kilometres distance) with an increase of dysentery as a result. The local government makes an effort by tanking drinking water to the villages, but cannot cope due to financial constraints. As a result the water supply for the population is inadequate and irregular.

It is anticipated that a new drought relief appeal, based on the two recent assessments will be launched in mid June 2002. It aims to extend the food ration component to highly vulnerable existing and new areas, and also incorporating a small but effective water provision component.

### **Coordination**

The SLRCS and the Federation continue to coordinate efforts with other agencies, primarily UN agencies such as UNDP, WFP and FAO.

The local Federation Representative uses every available opportunity (for example as a member of the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies' Emergency Preparedness Focal Group) to use the lessons learned from the recent high profile emergency operation to advocate for more effective coordination, and a change in policies and practices of all institutions.

The SLRCS in Hambantota and other Districts' local Government Agents to ensure that there is no duplication of efforts. SLRCS has nevertheless ensured that it acts independently in the final selection of beneficiaries.

For a full description of the National Society profile, see [www.ifrc.org](http://www.ifrc.org)

*For further details please contact :*

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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>*

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

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