

# 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

## PARAGUAY: FIRE

03 August 2004

The Federation's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity. It is the world's largest humanitarian organization and its millions of volunteers are active in over 181 countries.

### In Brief

This Information Bulletin (no. 01/2004) is being issued for information only. The Federation is not seeking funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at this time.

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All International Federation assistance seeks to adhere to the [Code of Conduct](#) and is committed to the [Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response](#) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. For support to or for further information concerning Federation programmes or operations in this or other countries, or for a full description of the national society profile, please access the Federation's website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

### The Situation

On Sunday, 1 August, Paraguay suffered its worst disaster in decades when a gas explosion caused a fire in the Ycua Bolaños supermarket in the outskirts of Asunción, killing at least 364 persons. The supermarket was a popular destination for families in a working-class neighbourhood, particularly on weekends.



The fire started around midday near the food court, which at the time was filled with children and their parents. When people tried to escape, they found that exit doors had been locked by security guards and in one case was welded shut, apparently by order of the store's managers who wanted to keep shoppers from fleeing without paying. Firefighters arrived quickly but found the main doors shut. In addition, there was only one water pump, which took firefighters more than an hour to get working.

Entire families perished together, most due to the inhalation of toxic gases, rather than from burns, according to the firefighters. The Ministry of Health has reported that 256 persons have been hospitalized, 70 of which are now in intensive care. President Nicanor Duarte has declared

At least 364 persons were killed after a fire broke out in a popular suburban supermarket in Asunción, Sunday.  
Photo: courtesy of Reuters

three days of national mourning.

Until this fire, Paraguay had been spared from many of the natural disasters that often affect other countries in the region, and the magnitude of this disaster overwhelmed the country's response capacity. There were not enough ambulances available, the hospitals' services collapsed and organizations were not able to coordinate effectively. President Duarte has already declared that a commission will be created to prevent this kind of disaster in the future and to better coordinate the response operations.

Neighbouring countries' governments have mobilized aid in the form of medicines, bandages and human resources.

## **Red Cross and Red Crescent action**

From the outset of the disaster, the Paraguayan Red Cross (PRC) assisted the response effort by transporting victims to hospitals and moving corpses to a temporary shelter near the supermarket. One PRC ambulance was activated, helping to bring victims to the nearest hospitals, although the PRC hospital was not included in the response phase. The PRC has also been participating in all the inter-organizational meetings to coordinate the emergency response and to establish a clearer role in the National Emergency Committee.

Around 100 Red Cross volunteers participated by providing basic medical assistance, and a temporary first aid stand was immediately set up at the disaster site. Some 50 PRC volunteers are now working to receive and classify medicines donated to local hospitals. Volunteers are also supporting the effort to count and identify corpses.

The ICRC is contributing to the National Society's relief activities by providing USD 3,000 to replenish the ambulance stocks that were used during the emergency response. This money will also be used pay for the ambulance's fuel costs and for food for volunteers.

With funds from the Spanish government's International Cooperation Agency (AECI), the Spanish Red Cross has been able to deploy a psychological support team to Paraguay to help the victims and their families through this tragedy. The team is scheduled to arrive on 3 August and stay for a few days. During their time in the country, the PRC will discuss with them how best to ensure that psychological support continues to be provided after the Spanish Red Cross team has left. Meanwhile, the PRC is also contributing with some psychological counselling, in coordination with the Paraguayan professional association of psychologists.

The Federation's Lima Regional Delegation has been coordinating with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to send an expert in the Humanitarian Supply Management System (SUMA) process to Paraguay as there is currently no one in Paraguay with these skills. The expert will arrive in Asunción on 3 August and will meet with the Ministry of Health, the PRC and other actors participating in the relief effort. The goal of this mission is not only to support the emergency operation, but also to train human resources in the country in the SUMA system.

In addition, DHL has announced a pledge to support the PRC in the relief actions that will follow this emergency.

*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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