

# 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

11 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. 02/2004) 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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### The Situation

The death toll for the tragic fire that occurred last Sunday, 1 August, in Paraguay's Ycua Bolaños supermarket, has reached 369, of whom 40 were children and 53 have not yet been identified. More than 100 people are still reported as missing. Almost 500 people have been hospitalized, many in intensive care, so it is possible that the number of deaths could still increase. Experts from Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Spain are helping to identify bodies using DNA, fingerprints and forensic odontology. Samples of 110 corpses have been sent to Spain for analysis.



Fallen roof supports and burned goods can be seen through a hole in the wall of the Ycua Bolanos supermarket, after one of the worst disasters Paraguay has seen in a century.

Photo: courtesy of Reuters

The police have explained that the blaze was started by a combination of concentrated gases in pipes that were blocked due to a lack of maintenance. Police have ruled out the possibility that the fire was started intentionally.

The Ministry of Education and Health has sent a team of psychologists to schools with a high number of victims among their students, which includes many of the schools located nearby the supermarket.

Thousands of Paraguayans have participated in street demonstrations of solidarity with the families of the victims, calling for justice.

The Paraguayan police and firefighters have inspected 27 other commercial centres in Asunción during the last several days to verify emergency exits. They have determined that the majority of the large stores do not meet safety standards, but the businesses have promised to update their safety systems as soon as possible.

The Paraguayan government has drawn up a plan for a second response phase following the emergency, which looks at rehabilitation. This includes compensation to the families of victims, special surgery for burn patients and the promotion of institutional strengthening so that the national disaster response system is better prepared in the future.

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

Immediately following the disaster, the Paraguayan Red Cross (PRC) began providing first aid and transportation to hospitals for victims. The National Society also engaged in search and rescue activities, and in moving, counting and identifying corpses. These activities were all carried out in support of the work of the Paraguayan fire fighters. At the same time, volunteers from the Youth Department supported the relief effort by accompanying victims and attending to relatives that were identifying the dead.

On the day following the fire, the PRC installed a first aid tent in front of the Ycua Bolaños supermarket, which also served as a donation collection centre. That day, eight volunteers also worked in the Recoleta cemetery, assisting families.

PRC volunteers have worked from the beginning of the emergency to receive and classify medicines donated to hospitals. This task is now continuing in the National Emergency Committee, which is the new focal point for aid. In addition, the Peruvian Red Cross, responding to a request for medicines from the Paraguayan Embassy in Lima, has initiated a petition for medical supplies from the largest laboratories in Peru, which will be channelled through the Civil Defence Institute.

Psychological support has continued, now with the assistance of a psychological support team from the Spanish Red Cross (SRC), which arrived in the field to help the victims, their families and the volunteers. This was the same team that provided counselling following the terrorist attack in Madrid in March. The Argentine Red Cross also offered to provide a psychological support team, but the Spanish contribution was considered sufficient to meet the needs of the population.

The SRC psychological support team organized its work by separating affected persons into five categories:

- Relatives of victims and survivors
- Wounded and families
- Volunteers
- Children and teenagers
- Community members

Between 8 and 9 August, two workshops were conducted by the SRC team to assist the 80 Red Cross volunteers who were present immediately following the tragedy. The SRC has also been training seven professionals from the psychology department of the Reina Sofia Hospital, which is the PRC's hospital, and the psychologists of the PRC headquarters.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) expert in the Humanitarian Supply Management System (SUMA) process that was deployed to the field has been able to coordinate the organization of a database for donations, supporting the Ministry of Health. PAHO's goal is to leave behind human resources trained in the SUMA process following this emergency.

The Alto Parana branch of the PRC has been active in the relief effort and organized a campaign called “Stamina Heart” to collect medicines and recruit blood donors. In addition, the branch has provided logistics support to families of the victims. The Amambay branch also carried out a blood donation campaign.

The Norwegian Government has announced a pledge of NOK 50,000 (approximately CHF 9,300) in support of the rehabilitation operation in Paraguay, but it remains to be determined whether these funds be channelled through the Red Cross or the UN system. The Federation is facilitating communication between the Norwegian Red Cross and the Paraguayan Red Cross in order to define specific PRC activities towards which this contribution could be used.

*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.*

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