

# ***BELARUS, MOLDOVA, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE : WINTER ASSISTANCE***

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## ***The Situation***

On 9 September an Alert was issued by the International Federation regarding the forthcoming humanitarian crisis in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. This Information Bulletin provides an update on the situation in advance of the planned launching of an Emergency Appeal on 30 September.

Throughout the four countries, at least 73 million people are already living below the poverty line. Russia's recent economic crisis has begun to take its toll on a population already battered by the rapid transition to an alternative system, bringing with it the inevitable human hardship of unemployment, inflation and disintegration of social/medical services. The August collapse of the rouble against the dollar has meant millions of Russians have lost their savings, either in the banking chaos, or simply because their wages and pensions - if these have been paid at all - have been reduced by less than half. As one medical observer noted, "we are witnessing an acute phase in a chronic process".

In remarks soon after his appointment, the Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, spoke about the priority of eliminating poverty. "We cannot conduct reforms that affect people adversely," he said, adding that the clearing of wage and pension arrears was "a problem to be solved once and for all." However, the formation of the new Russian government has been slow and difficult - three people refused the position of Deputy Prime Minister in charge of social policy, before Valentina Matviyenko accepted it.

The effects of Russia's economic and political uncertainty have spilled over its borders - to its main trading partners: Belarus (70% of its exports go to Russia), Ukraine (40%) and Moldova (52%). Over the past month, the currency of each country has been dragged down by the Russian rouble collapse, bringing price increases and shortages of goods, which will significantly worsen the situation for the most vulnerable. (According to the UN, 76% of Moldova's population already live below the poverty level). Although each country has its own specific problems, the factor common to all is the deepening catastrophic crisis especially for the most vulnerable groups - elderly, disabled, single parent families, families with many children and rural dwellers.

Compounding the difficulties, the outlook for the harvest across all four countries is poor. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, **Russia's** cereal and pulse crop is now forecast at about 67 million tonnes, 25% down from last year, reflecting reduced winter and spring plantings

and adverse weather. Some 39 of the country's 89 regions have been hit by exceptionally high temperatures and drought, while some southern regions have experienced flooding.

In **Ukraine**, rains came too late to boost the harvest of cereals and pulses, which is expected to be 32 million tonnes, 6 million tonnes less than last year. In **Belarus**, rain in late July/August benefited summer crops, but slowed winter grain harvesting; cereal output this year is forecast at just under 6 million tonnes, close to last year's total. In **Moldova**, the latest estimates put 1998 cereal production at 2.6 million tonnes, compared with 3.2 million tonnes last year.

The potato harvest across Russia has been severely damaged by rain, causing potatoes to rot. Since potatoes represent 10% of the national caloric intake, the failure of the crop may adversely affect general nourishment. During the Soviet era, 60% of potatoes were grown on private plots - today, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, it is 90%.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, the emptying of stores has been more noticeable than elsewhere, as comparatively wealthy Russians converted their roubles into durable/consumer goods. Elsewhere in the country, the apparently well-stocked shelves belie the unfolding tragedy. "Nobody can afford these prices," one shop assistant in Kaliningrad said recently, "this supermarket has turned into a museum."

Huge numbers of people are faced with a daily struggle for their existence, with no way of obtaining even basic essentials such as food and clothing, nor proper medical and social care. The acute poverty threatens the survival not only of today's vulnerable - but also the survival of future generations. The coming winter could well be the worst in a generation and the threat of mass starvation cannot be excluded in some regions.

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

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, in collaboration with the National Red Cross Societies of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, is preparing the launch next week of an unprecedented Appeal for humanitarian assistance to meet the enormous needs of millions of people suffering as a result of the current social and financial crisis in Russia.

When winter strikes, the International Red Cross will provide the most vulnerable with second-hand clothes, large-scale food provision (soup kitchens and family food parcels), hygiene parcels and seeds.

The areas of Russia (oblasts) which will be targeted include: Murmansk, Kaliningrad, Ivanovo, Kostroma, Kemerovo, Perm, Orenburg, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk, (Republics) Bashkortostan, Buryatia, and Khakassia.

The total target number of beneficiaries per country is as follows:

- ◆ Russia: 1,120,000
- ◆ Belarus: 21,100
- ◆ Ukraine: 170,000
- ◆ Moldova: 35,700

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