

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: Flooding after El Niño drought

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The Disaster

Late last week sudden flooding of the Sepik and Ramu rivers left about 50 villages under water in the Ambunti and Angoram districts of East Sepik Province. The National Disaster Emergency Services (NDES) and provincial authorities have evaluated the damage and are continuing to assess the situation. Parts of the Sepik and Ramu river systems appear to have suffered severe damage, although because of difficult access to most areas it will take time to get a full picture of needs. Based on initial information the Red Cross is preparing to respond.

Papua New Guinea is slowly recovering from its worst ever drought, caused by the El Niño effect. A large-scale response, including countrywide operations carried out by the PNG Red Cross and the Federation following the Federation's Drought Appeal, have successfully met the needs of the worst affected. For some time the PNGRCS/Federation has been warning that seasonal flooding and landslides common at this time of the year could be aggravated by the unstable soil conditions and erosion on the slopes of this mountainous country. The current heavy rainfall, while relieving the drought, are proving these forecasts correct.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

In previous years, exaggerated claims have led to an inappropriate response to flooding in this region. This has been taken into account to ensure that this time Red Cross action will be both timely and soundly based. Monitoring and reporting will be carried out by the PNGRCS/Federation team and the Secretariat in Geneva kept informed of progress.

The Federation will co-ordinate response through its delegate in Lae, who has been instructed to procure 5 litre water containers, plastic buckets and plastic sheeting. Its Relief Administrator will co-ordinate procurement and transport which will be provided (probably free) by the Lutheran Shipping agency which assisted the Red Cross in the past. The Administrator will accompany the ship and carry out distributions to villages along the affected segment of the river. The relief operations are expected to begin on Friday when the ship is due to depart on its scheduled Sepik run.

To assess longer term vulnerability and needs should the flooding continue the newly arrived Federation water/sanitation delegate will assist in the relief operation, to evaluate the water situation within the affected area and make recommendations on any further intervention.

Close communication will be maintained with the National Society, its Madang Branch, the NDES and the provincial authorities.

As noted, co-ordination has been established with the government through the NDES and the provincial offices. A press statement about the Red Cross response will be issued shortly, as soon as final numbers of beneficiaries have been established.

Needs

The PNGRCS/ Federation has been monitoring the situation since last week. The Madang Branch of the PNGRCS, drawing on information from NDES and the provincial offices, has identified the area along the Ramu river as being the most vulnerable. Villages from Annenberg to the coast are worst hit. Water containers and plastic sheeting, for both home repairs and clean water conservation, are urgently needed. In addition local clinics seem to be short of basic medicines. The possible health consequences of polluted water supplies will need to be carefully monitored.

The ECHO Desk Officer who is currently in PNG has determined that existing funding for the drought operation can be utilised. All materials are available in Lae. No relief items are therefore required at present. Federation staffing is adequate and PNGRCS is willing to provide additional staff to the extent possible.

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