

INDIA: CYCLONE

22 October 1999

Information Bulletin N° 1

The Disaster

A severe cyclone with wind speeds of 200 kilometres per hour struck parts of eastern India in the early hours of 18 October. As the storm hit the coastal State of Orissa, the winds crossed the Gopapur coast and accelerated twice in two hours to leave Ganjam district devastated. Although Orissa bore the brunt of the storm, the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal have also been affected following heavy rains sparked by the cyclone.

Official sources report 85 deaths although this figure is likely to rise. 71 people died in Ganjam district alone. Other districts affected by the cyclone including Puri, Jagatsinghpur, Khurda, Gajapatri and Balasore. The cyclone caused immense destruction leaving over 1,000 people injured, and 35,000 homes damaged or destroyed. Some 700, 000 people have been left homeless and agricultural crops, including thousands of coconut trees, have been flattened. Road and rail transportation has been disrupted as vast areas remain cut off due to flooding and roads which are blocked by uprooted trees. The situation has been compounded by damage to telecommunication, electricity and water supply systems in many areas.

It is estimated that approximately 300,000 people in 30 villages of the Ganjam district have been affected. The population of about 60 villages faced the full fury of the cyclone and 50% of the thatched houses were swept away. Approximately 30, 000 houses were destroyed, leaving some 150,000 people homeless. The commercial centre of southern Orissa, Berahampur, suffered extensive damage. The town has been without electricity or water supply for the past four days and many areas remain under water.

Whilst governmental authorities in the affected districts are making efforts to restore essential services, emergency services have been helping to evacuate people to safety and army helicopters have been air-dropping relief supplies to marooned communities.

As the strength of the cyclone dissipated, it unleashed heavy rains in its trail which inundated vast areas of West Bengal, and left 10,000 people homeless. The cyclone came as a double blow to many parts of West Bengal which suffered extensive flooding only weeks earlier from torrential rains during the South West Monsoon.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Volunteers from the state and district branches of the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) were quick to respond to the disaster and have been assisting the local authorities in relief and rescue work. Red Cross volunteers helped pack government rations for airdrops, while an assessment team from the Orissa state

branch visited Ganjam district on 19 October where access to affected villages has been hampered due to extensive flooding in the region. The team was able to reach a Red Cross cyclone shelter site in Gokharkuda village which was constructed with assistance from the German Red Cross and is situated approximately 10 km from Gopalpur, where the eye of the storm passed over. Almost 800 people from Gokharkuda are camped inside the shelter, most of them homeless since their houses were washed away in the storm. Due to the early warnings broadcast over local radio there were no casualties in the village as local Red Cross volunteers were able to evacuate the population immediately into the cyclone shelter. In addition to the cyclone shelter at Gokharkuda, villagers have sought refuge in four other Red Cross cyclone shelters at Sonapur (Ganjam District) and at Nuagarh, Tinpulia and Nogar (Puri District). Other areas could not be visited at the time due to extensive flooding. The Red Cross has provided emergency food and other non-food relief materials from local stocks to people currently accommodated in the cyclone shelters. A medical team from Orissa State branch has also been dispatched to meet the health needs in some of the worst affected villages.

Needs

The immediate needs identified by the IRCS are for non-food relief items for distribution to the affected population. With winter approaching and temperatures dropping, blankets, clothing and plastic sheeting for repairing homes are all urgently required. In addition there is an acute shortage of potable drinking water in some areas, consequently water purification materials and medical supplies for diarrhoeal diseases are in demand. The IRCS have the capacity to respond to the disaster through their own resources and will be rendering assistance to 1,500 of the worst affected families - carrying out distributions of blankets, clothing and plastic sheeting.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and
Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department