

SRI LANKA: FLOODS

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The heavy and late arrival of monsoon rains at the end of December, 1998 and in early January, 1999 caused serious flooding in seven states of the country, mainly located in lowland areas and along the coastal belt. Close to 31,000 families (approximately 155,000 people) were reportedly affected. Some 15,000 families were initially displaced. As the waters receded they returned to their homes where many found that few belongings remained and houses were damaged or destroyed. Sri Lanka Red Cross Society volunteers and paid staff, supported by the Federation, have worked tirelessly to determine the number of affected, and to carry out the difficult task of selecting those most vulnerable. The swift response and action has brought early relief to the victims, enabling them to rebuild their lives with as little disruption as possible.

The Disaster

The floods occurred in an unpredictable fashion, affecting some areas on 25 December, 1998, and others between 1 and 6 January, 1999. Flood waters rose in many areas within a matter of two to three hours, and in many locations almost reached house roof levels. Many huts and houses built with local materials were destroyed or severely damaged, along with paddy crops, and lagoon fish and prawn yields. Food stocks and the few belongings of those people living in the flood plains or along the rivers were swept away. Victims sought refuge in schools, government buildings, similar structures or relocated to higher ground (such as railroad grades).

Most of the affected population earns their living through casual labour, paddy cultivation, small-scale coastal and lagoon fishery, and brick making. Despite living on a flood plain, people prefer to stay close to their resources and therefore refuse to relocate. In the districts of Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Vavuniya alone, more than 18,500 acres of paddy were lost. A second crop is expected in some locations as early as April and as late as September. In order to survive over the coming lean months, most of the affected people will depend on humanitarian assistance to supplement the meagre income generated from daily labour.

Contrary to initial fears, the traditional system of ancient water tanks (storage reservoirs) does not appear to have incurred much damage. No tanks were reported to have broken. However, only detailed inspections will reveal the condition of the water tanks. Areas close to or within the *Mahaweli Ganga* river basin suffered additional hardship since many of the upstream tank flood gates were opened to release the mounting pressure.

Figures concerning the affected population were gathered by the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS) through its own network of branches, staff and volunteers, as well as from Secretaries of the respective districts and the Directorate of Social Services. The SLRCS checked and cross-checked the data supplied in the preliminary reports. In addition, the SLRCS carried out vulnerability assessments, and in some cases made house-to-house visits and individual assessments to determine specific needs.

Latest events

As soon as the flood waters began to recede, people began to return home to begin the reconstruction and repair of their damaged houses. The water has now largely receded in most areas, and the rains have subsided. Meteorological forecasts however still indicate a high risk of additional rain moving in from the south-east (Bay of Bengal). Any more rain at this stage would immediately cause a further rise of the already high water tables and additional flooding. In the medium term, a rise of malaria and similar water and vector borne diseases is anticipated since much of the remaining water has turned stagnant. Authorities and SLRCS staff and volunteers are planning ways to address this problem as soon as possible.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

{ *Relief Distribution*

In the initial stage of the floods when most victims were sheltered in schools, people were provided (through various government institutions) with a three day ration of cooked food and a 7-10 day quantity of dry rations. At the request of the SLRCS, the operation is being supported by two Delegates (Relief and Information) from the Federation's South Asia Regional Delegation in New Delhi. The Delegates will assess the Society's disaster response and preparedness capacity and information needs, as well as monitor the current operation. Based on the initial plan and the assessments, the SLRCS procured the following relief items with pre-financing made available from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF):

- Kitchen utensils (aluminium sets of 5 items) - 3,089 sets
- Plastic mats - 7,142 mats
- Bedsheets - 6,581 sets
- Milk food (packets) - 1,196 packets @ 400 g
- Soap - 3,122 bars

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Sri Lanka made available 2,000 reinforced plastic tarpaulins, mainly for Trincomalee and Vavuniya.

| District | Estimated number of affected families | Selected by SLRCS as most vulnerable families |
|---|--|--|
| Ampara | 4,125 | 400 |
| Batticaloa | 9,324 | 611 |
| Badulla | 350 | 0 |
| Mannar | 3,000 | 500 |
| Polonnaruwa | 2,000 | 600 |
| Trincomalee | 9,786 | 460 |
| Vavuniya | 2,312 | 1,000 |
| TOTAL | 30,897 | 3,571 |
| based on average of 5 members in a family | 154,485 people | 17,855 people |

The selection of the 'most vulnerable' was based on criteria such as loss of house/hut, degree of damage to house/hut, loss of property, type of income, level of income, and other support within the family. The availability of limited supplies also played a decisive role, and with more support becoming available more vulnerable families may possibly be included in the distribution. The selection of beneficiaries also took into account traditional social structures and input from village leaders.

The entire supply of relief items were loaded on trucks on January 17, 1999, and reached their destination within one to two days. The bulk of the supplies have been distributed, however, given the security situation in the country the operation will continue in some area for a few more days.

Distribution of the relief items started in most locations on 18 and 19 January, 1999. Branches ensured that beneficiaries were duly registered with name, village, and verified receipt of the goods by signature and/or finger print. Distributions were organised and efficient, largely due to the participation of over 130 SLRCS volunteers in this operation. The bulk of the distribution in 'cleared' areas will be completed by the end of January. Distribution in 'uncleared' areas require more logistics and prior clearance by the military authorities, but even in the less accessible areas distribution will probably be completed within the first half of February 1999. In accordance with cultural norms, all distributions are attended by Divisional Secretaries as well as by the concerned village representative (Gram Sewaka) to assure proper identity of the beneficiaries.

{ ***Information, Finance and Disaster Management/Preparedness Training***

A substantial part of the International Federation's support will be through training activities aimed at strengthening the National Society's disaster response and preparedness capacity, its information unit, and its financial systems. This disaster has provided an opportunity to gather data on performance which will allow these training initiatives to be more effectively targeted.

Financial Systems

An assessment of the financial systems at the SLRCS was carried out in early 1998 through the Federation's South Asia Regional Delegation. Recommendations are being implemented with the technical support of the International Federation, and with funding made available by the British Red Cross. The Regional Financial Development Delegate is meeting with SLRCS to review financial measures implemented for this operation. A financial workshop will be developed to address areas identified from both the initial assessment and the follow-up visit specific to the flood operation.

Information Systems

The SLRCS is gradually making gains in improving its public in the country. Local and national press coverage was good during the critical stages of the flood operation. The Federation's Information Delegate used the actual operation to assess both strengths and weaknesses, again in preparation for developmental support of the SLRCS, and a workshop will be developed that will incorporate lessons learned.

Disaster Management/Preparedness

As an immediate measure, SLRCS staff and volunteers will be included in the regular monthly community-based disaster preparedness training in neighbouring India. At least two Sri Lanka-specific Community-Based Disaster Preparedness Training Workshops will also be conducted before mid-June. The agenda will include practical vulnerability/capacity assessments, action planning, as well as traditional disaster related training for up to 40 individuals per workshop.

The efficient implementation by SLRCS of this current relief operation can be attributed in large measure to the fact that a small number of officers had already participated in relevant regional training over the past two years.

Outstanding needs

Further assistance and response will depend on the weather, and the National Society will carefully monitor the effect of any major rainfall in the near future. The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has pledged EUR 100,000. As additional funding becomes available, the currently very strict selection of the most vulnerable could possibly include additional beneficiaries who had to be left out due to limited resources.

The SLRCS, through the support of both the International Federation and the ICRC, is making steady grounds to improve their effectiveness. The International Federation's 1999 Plan of Action (POA) is summarised in the 1999 Emergency Appeal. The full POAs are available by contacting the Asia & Pacific Department and funds are being requested to continue to meet the objectives.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Close co-ordination and information sharing is maintained with the relevant government authorities by the SLRCS. As the lead for this operation, SLRCS has kept the Federation, ICRC and the local and national print and electronic media informed.

Contributions

ECHO

EUR 100,000

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