

BANGLADESH: FLOODS

22 September 2000

appeal no. 20/2000

situation report no. 3

period covered: 8 - 21 September 2000

Food items have been procured by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and distributions in the 13 targeted Districts to 32,500 persons are about to begin. A tidal surge caused further flooding in Sandwip island at the end of August and numbers of victims of floods and river erosion are increasing each day at an alarming rate, as are needs. Although the initial response to the Appeal was encouraging, further contributions are urgently needed in order to alleviate the suffering of those who have lost homes, possessions, crops and livelihoods. Funding is also sought to conduct a thorough survey of river erosion in order to seek solutions with a view to mitigating the impact of such disasters.

The context

For the past two years, Bangladesh has suffered from severe flooding. This year, high levels of water draining from north-east India into the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh, have caused floods and severe river erosion, with an increasing risk of tidal floods along the coast. These monsoon-related disasters have left more than 1.5 million homeless, and the numbers of those affected are increasing daily.

Some vulnerable families are attempting to provide for their basic needs by separating - fathers and sons travel into the cities in an attempt to find work, leaving women and children to fend for themselves in flood-affected areas with limited access to food and water. Every year, some 250,000 Bangladeshis

migrate to the capital city of Dhaka because they have lost both their homes and livelihoods as a result of river erosion.

Supplementary food support provided through this Appeal will help rural families maintain their health until flood waters recede and land can again be cultivated, providing work, income and food.

Latest events

As forecast, conditions in Bangladesh's major river basins continue to worsen with water levels having risen for the last week. Of the 46 monitoring stations maintained by the Bangladesh Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, on 19 September 12 points recorded above danger levels and the major Jumuna, Padma and Meghna rivers registered rises at all points. In the last few days, inflows of water from India have intensified and rainfall has been torrential in many places. On 12 September, heavy rainfall over the Indian state of West Bengal prompted the Indian government to open flood gates along the Padma (Ganges) river which caused a huge surge of water against the weakened Rajshahi embankment in Bangladesh. This embankment, the Panchbati, which protects Rajshahi city, home to 350,000 people, has been washed away. From 17 September, 274 mm of rain which fell over 48 hours aggravated the situation, resulting in knee-deep water in much of the city. In addition, squally winds in the area damaged around 1,000 houses while some 10,000 slum dwellers were forced to relocate to embankments or schools.

The violent tidal surge in the Bay of Bengal on 31 August that affected Sandwip island also caused considerable damage along coastal areas. In five Unions of Satkhira District surveyed by the disaster preparedness delegate on 8 September, some 2,750 families were affected by the tidal surge, with 1,160 of these families having lost their homes. Many of the affected people are living in squalid conditions, crowded into the courtyard of a local school. Coastal areas and islands in the Bay of Bengal remain at risk of further tidal flooding. In fact, another tidal surge hit the Bay of Bengal on 15 September, once again inundating Sandwip Island, though the impact was less significant.

River erosion and flooding is continuing throughout the country, and is worsening in severity. Every day, the local media report disasters in different areas with severe river erosion and the loss of homes and farmland. The following Districts have recently been much affected: Faridpur, Shariatpur, Tangail, Sirajganj, Rajshahi, Manikganj and Chapai-Nawabganj, all located in major river basins. Predictions are equally worrying for Munshiganj and Narayanganj, located close to Dhaka, which are even now largely under water.

On 19 September, in Kazipur Thana (sub-district) of Sirajganj District, 1,040 houses were washed away when a 100-metre stretch of river defences was destroyed. More than 100,000 people have been made homeless this year in the District due to river erosion. In Manikganj, rising waters have cut communications between District headquarters and four Thanas causing immense suffering for thousands of people and causing sharp rises in the price of essential commodities. Satkhira District in the south-west part of the country was inspected by a joint BDRCS/Federation team on 8 September where it was found that flooding had caused 1,160 families in one sub-district alone to leave their homes.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Relief operation in 13 Districts •

Disaster Relief Emergency (DREF) funds in the amount of CHF 300,000 were released for the purchase of 260 MT of rice and 52 MT of lentils for distribution in the 13 Districts initially targeted by the appeal: Kurigram, Gaibandha, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Chandpur, Chapai-Nawabganj, Pabna, Sirajganj, Tangail, Manikganj, Munshiganj, Shariatpur and Bogra. This food was delivered to the BDRCS warehouse in Dhaka, with the exception of 14 MT of lentils due to arrive on 24 September. The BDRCS/Federation has drawn up a schedule for distribution of 40 kgs rice and 8 kgs lentils to 500 highly vulnerable families (2,500 people) in each of the 13 priority Districts in order to assist a total of 32,500 persons. This supply will support beneficiaries for one month. Deliveries to the Units are now underway and the first distribution is to take place on 23 September.

Relief Operation in Sandwip/coastal Chittagong •

A team consisting of BDRCS, Federation and donor National Society staff left for Chittagong on 5 September to purchase 45 MT of rice and 9 MT of lentils for distribution in Sandwip and the coastal area of Chittagong. On 8 September, the team left by boat for Sandwip to manage the distribution of 20 kg of rice and 4 kg of lentils to 2,000 families with the support of BDRCS volunteers. These rations, sufficient for 15 days, have been successfully distributed. However, an assessment in the area has highlighted the need for further food and medical assistance. A distribution of 5 MT of rice and 1 MT of lentils on Hatiya island, also affected by the tidal surge, has also been carried out.

Surveys of the disaster-hit Districts •

Teams made up of BDRCS, Federation and donor National Society staff are continuing to perform surveys throughout the country. A German Red Cross team recently examined the Gumti embankment in Comilla which was breached last year with devastating results, while a British Red Cross team recently returned from inspecting three Districts in the south-west of the country. A joint BDRCS/Federation team also carried out a further survey of the hard-hit Districts of Sirajganj and Manikganj.

Outstanding needs

Many victims affected by river erosion and subsequent flooding during the monsoon season have now been homeless for over a month. Though some have found shelter with relatives, many more continue to live in squalid conditions, with thousands cramped together on elevated embankments. Although a small amount of aid was distributed by the BDRCS and the Bangladesh government in the early days of the disaster, little further help has reached them. Relief goods currently being distributed fail to address the outstanding needs of the disaster victims whose numbers are increasing at an alarming rate each day.

Those who have the resources are obliged to rebuild their homes, deal with unserviceable tubewells, damaged or destroyed sanitary facilities and the threat of waterborne epidemics. With large areas still under water, and embankments and fields destroyed, there is little scope for earning a living, therefore the flood victims who were already living in poverty, are now desperately short of food.

The Federation is actively seeking funding from donor National Societies for a comprehensive survey of river erosion, its causes and ameliorative remedies. The current approach of relief support for victims of floods and river erosion will need to be complemented by significant efforts to prevent or mitigate the effects of such natural disasters in the future.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The BDRCS and the Federation continue to liaise with governmental agencies, UN agencies, ECHO, USAID, NGOs, diplomatic missions and the media. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) Holland recently met the Federation to share information and resources with a view to monitoring potential medical problems through its local network.

River erosion has been gaining both national and international media attention. With the help of local experts, the Federation is currently developing an information package to support river erosion advocacy work and the Delegation is producing an advocacy video on the human aspects of river erosion in Bangladesh. The video explains the complex realities of providing relief and support to victims of river erosion. It is planned that the video will be shown to the diplomatic community, international organisations and NGOs during the week beginning 25 September.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

As the flooding and river erosion worsen in Bangladesh, the BDRCS network of active staff and volunteers which reaches to grassroots level in every community, is ready to deliver emergency relief. The initial response to the preliminary appeal was encouraging, but the flow of donations has slowed. Further commitment is essential to relieve further suffering and to ensure provision of food and assistance to 200,000 of those worst affected by monsoon-related disasters.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and
Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department

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