

CHINA: FLOODS

21 August 1996

appeal no. 10/96

situation report no. 2

period covered: 27 July - 20 August 1996

Continuing heavy rains in recent weeks have caused further flooding, especially in the north and north west. Assessments of needs are under way. All Branches of the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) in affected areas are assisting the displaced and RCSC medical teams are providing on the spot treatment for ailments. However, demands exceed resources and more relief supplies, especially medicines and food, are urgently needed for the most vulnerable, to counter the destruction of the rice harvest and illnesses caused by precarious living conditions .

The context

Torrential rains which reached disastrous proportions in early July continued in recent weeks. Provinces in South, Central, North and Northwest China were severely affected by floodwaters. Previous flood records have been surpassed in terms of duration, geographical areas affected, and the extent of the damage. Media reports place the death toll at over 2,700 people.

Latest events

Although water levels are slowly receding in some areas, millions of people are still displaced, often living on top of dikes or in other high ground areas. Their living conditions are cramped, unsanitary, and exposed to the elements. They are exceptionally vulnerable to epidemics as they huddle under makeshift shelters with all of their belongings, including farm animals that survived the destruction. Outbreaks of contagious diseases have been reported in at least 19 provinces.

With temperatures hovering around 38° - 45° C (100° - 113° F), the weather continues to pose health risks for the flood victims. There have been many cases of heat stroke requiring treatment by medical personnel from both the Red Cross and the Department of Public Health.

Communities and croplands along the Yangtze River remain inundated. The authorities have not been able to begin draining these areas as the water levels in the river and its tributaries remain higher than the surrounding land. Draining, requiring two months to complete, is not expected to begin for another month. With several weeks left to the monsoon season, and the ever-present threat of further tropical storms and typhoons, there are fears that more death and destruction could lie ahead.

Despite on-going rain, the Yangtze River appears to have crested through much of Hubei Province. No additional major damage has been reported, or is expected. There is concern, however, that as the water recedes, the remaining dikes will be weakened, placing the hundreds of thousands of people still stranded on top of these and other embankments at risk.

Temperatures exceeded 45° C (113° F) for several days in a row in Xinjiang Province, in north-west China. Numerous flash floods eroded deep chasms in the land and caused considerable damage to houses, fields, and the infrastructure (roads, railways, bridges, power and water lines, etc.). Thousands of people are still displaced, their crops destroyed, and their health and livelihoods threatened. In one village, a wall of water 6 - 7 metres (19 - 23 feet) high crashed through the community. A total of 59 people are reported to have died, while 89 remain missing.

Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, and Shangdong Provinces along the Yellow River have also been flooded due to heavy rainfall over the past several weeks. Heavy rains also caused flooding in Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Henan, and Liaoning. Fujian Province, which bore the brunt of Typhoon Gloria, also experienced additional flooding as heavy rains fell on saturated ground.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Red Cross Society of China Headquarters •

The Red Cross Society of China has co-ordinated relief activities and provided support to its branches throughout the affected areas. It has sent numerous assessment teams to the field and has provided cash allocations for tents, food, disinfectants, clothing, and medical supplies.

The RCSC Headquarters is gathering information from its provincial and local branches on the new flooding in the north and north-west of the country. After determining the impact, the RCSC may ask for other affected areas to be added to the appeal.

Red Cross Society of China Branches •

RCSC branches throughout China are continuing to assist the affected population. Regular field inspections by health teams are being conducted to ensure appropriate treatment as well as proactive measures to prevent epidemics. The branches continue to battle with limited supplies and meagre resources as they face overwhelming demands for their services.

Red Cross Society of China Medical Teams •

Medical teams representing the RCSC and the Department of Public Health have been working in the affected areas since the outbreak of the disaster. Tens of thousands of medical personnel have been treating patients wherever they are. Medical clinics can be seen among the settlements of displaced people -- in some cases on top of river embankments and dikes.

The RCSC Medical Teams reported treating patients suffering from dysentery, diarrhoea, respiratory ailments, skin infections, and heat stroke. Cases of cholera, hepatitis, typhoid, and haemorrhagic fever have also been reported.

Red Cross Society of China Disaster Preparedness Centres •

The demands on the DP Centres have exceeded their limited resources. All centres in the affected areas have been involved in the flood relief operation.

International Federation •

The Federation Relief/Monitoring Delegate, and the Federation Information Delegate on loan from the Europe Department, have just returned from a 10 day field mission. Together with the Vice President of the RCSC, and the Deputy Director of its Relief Department, they toured the flood affected areas of Xinjiang Province. The Delegates and the Deputy Director then spent the remaining seven days in Hubei and Hunan Provinces, where they monitored distributions of relief supplies and documented the situation for media purposes. Video taped footage and still photographs have been provided to news agencies.

Outstanding needs

The RCSC has determined that medicine, disinfectants, food, and clothing are still urgently needed. Cash contributions are desperately required to continue support of the relief operation. In many areas, local RCSC leaders emphasised the severe shortage of medicine and food -- echoed by beneficiaries throughout the flood affected areas.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The Federation Delegates had extensive contacts with Chinese Government officials and the domestic and international media throughout the 10 day field mission. In each province, senior officials and top level staff of the Department of Public Health briefed them. Co-operation and coordination between the government and the RCSC remains strong.

The Federation Delegates conducted interviews with CCTV (Chinese Television), the BBC World Service, Cable News Network (CNN), other major international media services and national press. Two press releases were sent from the field and stories were picked up by several major news agencies.

Contributions

In addition to those contributions and pledges outlined in Annex 1 (attached), reallocations from past flood operations authorised by the German Red Cross (CHF 64,960) and the Japanese Red Cross (CHF 85,000) were made.

Conclusion

The situation remains very serious, although so far the initial needs of the displaced have been met. However, local government and RCSC resources are stretched to the limit. Without external support the most vulnerable face a serious risk of epidemics and possible food shortages in the coming months.

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