

SUDAN: DROUGHT

11 November 1996

appeal no. 17/96

situation report no. 1

period covered: 10 October - 3 November 1996

The Red Sea Hills region, located in north-eastern Sudan, is susceptible to chronic drought. Years of relief food assistance have affected the traditional coping mechanisms of this agro-pastoralist population and have created a level of dependency on external aid. The current deterioration of food security in Red Sea Hills became evident in March 1996 when the price of sorghum began to rise sharply and the Sudanese Red Crescent Society (SRCS) early warning system identified a rapid decline in the nutritional status of the population. A Government/NGO assessment in early summer confirmed that the rising prices of grain, the imbalance of terms of trade and the slow start of the summer rains were already affecting the population's nutritional status. Following a Federation/SRCS assessment in late September/early October an appeal was launched for CHF 3,902,000 to assist 160,000 vulnerable people.

The context

Two years of negligible rainfall and crop failure have left the majority of the Beja People in the Red Sea State in North Eastern Sudan seriously threatened by famine. The Red Sea Hills area is an area that is frequently subjected to droughts as in 1984-85 and 1991-92 when the international community intervened on a large scale to assist 500,000 people threatened by starvation due to food shortages. The present situation raises similar fears.

The most vulnerable amongst the population are migrating from remote rural areas to live in makeshift shelters on the outskirts of towns, where they hope to find food. Almost half of the children among the displaced people suffer from malnutrition. Vitamin deficiencies due to food shortages are also evident among the population.

Two-thirds of the people's livestock have died and most of the remaining animals have been sold to purchase grain. The Beja people traditionally rely on their livestock for survival, trading the animals for grain and other food items. However, the harvest failure has made grain prices skyrocket, while at the same time livestock prices have plummeted due to poor health of the animals.

Following an assessment mission to the Red Sea Hills from 28 September to 10 October the International Federation and the Sudanese Red Crescent launched an appeal to assist 160,000 people in Sinkat and Halaib Districts with rations of oil, pulses and cereals for three months. The SRCS/Federation assessment team, and an Oxfam assessment team visiting the area at the same time, considered some 240,000 out of a total population of 355,000 in need of immediate relief.

Oxfam will assist 84,500 people in neighbouring areas (Rural Port Sudan and North Tokar), while the SRCS/Federation will cover needs of the remaining 155,500.

According to recent assessments by SRCS/Federation staff the situation is deteriorating rapidly as the people are still awaiting arrival of food.

UN Security Council Sanctions on Sudan Airways and other Sudanese registered airlines, scheduled to be imposed on November 15, might have serious implications for domestic flights as all or most aeroplanes in Sudan are maintained abroad. Due to poor in-country maintenance facilities this may pose serious safety problems for domestic aeroplanes. This factor can have serious implications for delegate movements, especially en route to/from Khartoum - Port Sudan.

Latest events

In a follow up to the previous assessments, two SRC/Federation staff visited Red Sea Hills from 23-27 October to evaluate the situation. Their findings were as follows:

- ♦ No signs of improvement since the assessment team's visit 28 September - 10 October. On the contrary, displacement to the urban sector continues at the same rate as before and increased population movements are expected.
- ♦ Winter has started in the region making the health situation worse. In Sinkat province the need for shelter and blankets for displaced populations is urgent.
- ♦ Supplementary feeding at SRCS feeding centres, targeting about 7,400 most vulnerable, has not begun. WFP and SRCS signed a letter of understanding on 17 October to release 66 MT of food for this purpose of which 95% is now delivered to Port Sudan for immediate transportation to feeding centres in Red Sea Hills.
- ♦ Sorghum prices in the province are still high but decreasing slightly (55,000 Sudanese Pounds per sack on 27 October compared to 65,000 a month ago). Prices in the production area are expected to decrease when the new harvest begins in mid-November.
- ♦ Livestock prices are still very low which makes terms of trade unfavourable for the population who, despite Government subsidies, cannot afford to buy sorghum.
- ♦ No winter rains have fallen in the Sahel so far -- winter rains expected in Gebeit el Maaden and Mohammed Gol area (North of Port Sudan) will severely affect accessibility to the targeted population as road conditions will deteriorate.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

SRCS has approached the Government's Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) requesting all possible assistance in facilitating collaboration from central and local authorities.

On October 14 the Federation Head of Delegation and the SRCS Secretary General met with the Minister for Social Planning and the Commissioner for HAC to inform them about the forthcoming operations and to request Government collaboration in facilitating all necessary permissions regarding the relief operation. The Minister and the Commissioner confirmed that they will do their utmost to facilitate the operation including endorsing a Federation request to the Minister of Finance to renew the Customs Agreement for tax exemptions on imported goods.

On 31 October the Ministry of Finance approved the Federation's request for renewal of the Customs Agreement and instructed the Customs Police to proceed with the issuing of such an agreement for one year until October 1997. This is an essential achievement as the Ministry of Finance, in June 1996, cancelled Customs Agreements for all NGOs. The former SRCS/Federation agreement of 1991 expired on 6 June 1996. The new one is now valid only for the International Federation and not for SRCS which means that all imported goods, including gifts in kind to the SRCS, must be sent in the name of the Federation.

The Delegation's Logistics Officer visited Red Sea Hills from 28 October to 3 November to investigate the present food situation, logistical capacity of the SRCS Regional Branch, storage facilities in distribution areas and the fuel situation. In summary the conclusions are as follows:

- ◆ The food must be transported as soon as possible from Gedarif (most probable purchasing area) to the main distribution points.
- ◆ Immediate action should be taken to establish radio communication in the shipping point (Gedarif) in order to co-ordinate and follow up truck movements.
- ◆ It is essential that sufficient fuel be stored for the main distribution to Red Sea Hills and to sub-distribution points in the four districts concerned, to avoid any shortage during the operation.

The Federation Delegation in Sudan, now increased by one logistics delegate, is waiting for four others to start the operation in collaboration with the SRCS. The bidding process has begun for local purchase of sorghum, which seems to be the most practical and economically most favourable solution.

The SRCS Port Sudan Branch Office has started preparations for fulfilling its role in the operation to include: recruitment of volunteers, training of monitors, maintenance of existing SRCS vehicle fleet (seven medium sized trucks and three Land Cruisers), investigating food and fuel storage facilities in the four main distribution areas (Sinkat, Haya, Derudeb and Halaib), finalizing construction of the main warehouse in Port Sudan, preparing existing feeding centres and preparing an "Allocation List" i.e. analysing all final distribution points in order to produce a Plan of Action for the distribution. It should be noted the final distribution points in Red Sea Hills are located between 60 and 160 km outside the main towns (Sinkat, Haya and Derudeb); and in Halaib Province, north of Port Sudan the distances are 187 km, 295 km and 300 km from Port Sudan, making logistics extremely difficult.

The relief operation is a joint SRCS/Federation operation in which the roles and responsibilities of the National Society and the Federation Delegation will be specified in an Operational Protocol. The Protocol places special emphasis on the requirement to follow standard financial and reporting procedures of the Federation.

Outstanding needs

All needs specified in the appeal of 22 October are still unmet. Immediate financial and material support from international partners is urgently needed.

The delegation's vehicle fleet was recently analysed by Senior Logistics Officer, Regional Delegation, Nairobi which revealed that only two of the Sudan Delegation's eight vehicles could be used in the field. The others are used for local transport needs in Khartoum. It is recommended that the fleet be increased to five vehicles to meet current needs.

For the five incoming delegates at least three field-capable vehicles are urgently needed. Given the complexity of the operation it is envisaged that more vehicles (Land Cruiser Hard Top) are needed to transport Federation/SRCS staff and volunteers to the final distribution points and for monitoring. ICRC and UNHCR are unable to rent or lend vehicles at this time, and the type of vehicles needed for the operation for personnel movement, given the terrain and climatic conditions in Red Sea Hills, cannot be rented locally.

Other needs for this operation are radio communication in vehicles and handsets for Delegates/SRCS operational staff, and portable computers.

The Delegation will specify these needs as soon as a logistics plan of action has been elaborated. For radio communication equipment Government permission is required and being pursued.

In addition, Participating National Societies are urged to support this operation with secondment of delegates. The drought operations are stretching the operational capacity of the Delegation - already involved in flood relief programmes.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

SRCS in Red Sea State

Red Sea Hills has been an area of concern for SRCS and the Federation since the large relief operations in the mid '80s and early '90s. Several bilateral development projects have been implemented by SRCS and sister Societies including the Danish, Norwegian and British Red Cross. The former two are ongoing. SRCS is considered to be very strong in Red Sea State in comparison with other areas of Sudan and has a long-standing experience in carrying out relief operations.

NGOs

Oxfam carries out development activities in rural Port Sudan and north Tokar, and to some degree in Sinkat working through the local communities, and has provided some emergency assistance to vulnerable people in these districts.

Besides SRCS/Federation presence in the area, Oxfam is now preparing for a food relief operation in the areas mentioned above. Close co-ordination with Oxfam is maintained. SRCS/Federation and Oxfam keep contacts with local authorities to obtain access and support to the operation.

UN Agencies

WFP participated in a multi-team assessment in July, but disagreed on the need for a general food distribution in the area which delayed the final assessment report. When SRCS/Federation's and Oxfam's assessment teams presented their findings WFP immediately called a meeting asking for SRCS/Federation and Oxfam participation in a new assessment to the area. SRCS/Federation and Oxfam declined to participate as both organizations had sent in multi-disciplinary teams to assess the situation and recommended an intervention earlier.

UNICEF and the Federal Ministry of Health sent an assessment team to the area on October 25-28. The team met with SRCS and Oxfam in Port Sudan but the results of this assessment are not yet known.

Government

The Government, through the Humanitarian Aid Commission, has requested International organizations to assist the population in Red Sea State. Local authorities continue to assist the most vulnerable by giving free food through government institutions. The Government is providing subsidized sorghum at a stabilized price of 24,000 Sudanese Pounds per 90 kg sack, which still puts it beyond the reach of the most vulnerable.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

In order not to hamper its humanitarian objectives, the Federation Secretariat has tapped into its Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to cover the costs of purchase for 500 MT of pulses and 200 MT of palm oil. An additional CHF 150,000 has been borrowed from DREF to cover the costs of setting up the operations. This is in addition to previous loans from DREF to cover costs associated with flood relief operations in Sudan in September of this year.

With the onset of winter rains, the situation is highly likely to worsen. Delays in international response will affect the Federation's ability to respond to the humanitarian needs posed by this emergency.

The famine situation is getting worse every day and rapid intervention is needed to avoid massive starvation. Food prices in the region are still high and far above the purchasing power of the Beja. The expected harvest in other regions will decrease prices (which favours local purchases for the operation), but will not affect the Beja's access to food. Population movements are increasing posing a future threat to urban areas, a risk of a deteriorating health situation and an outbreak of epidemics.

The winter season is causing new problems for the population as cold increases suffering. It might be necessary to add new items to earlier specified needs (blankets and shelter, particularly to Displaced.)

No rain has fallen in the Sahel area therefore prospects of local grain production in January/February are low. Winter rains in Halaib Province, north of Port Sudan, might hamper accessibility.

The fuel situation in-country is uncertain. Access to sufficient fuel is required rapidly to avoid later shortages. UN sanctions on Sudan, scheduled to be imposed on November 15, might hamper severely relief efforts.

Given the seriousness of the situation, financial, material and service assistance are urgently needed to ensure an effective humanitarian intervention.

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