

BULGARIA:

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISLOCATION

14 January 1998

appeal no. 18/96 - 02/97

situation report no. 4

period covered: 1 September - 10 December 1997

The poor response to the International Federation's revised appeal 2/97 for Bulgaria is jeopardising a number of Bulgarian Red Cross assistance programmes. The National Society has prioritised the provision of food to the most vulnerable as inadequate levels of nutrition continue to affect the health of increasing numbers of the population throughout the country.

The context

Following the issuing of a second Appeal for Bulgaria in February 1997, a further revision was launched in July to reflect the continuing economic deterioration which has accompanied major economic readjustment and austerity measures introduced by the new government. Existing programmes were expanded and three major new components added: the provision of dry milk to 8,000 children in 100 state social institutions, the distribution of food parcels to 100,000 elderly persons and a programme of health education, targeting vulnerable groups at risk from the increase in the incidence of common diseases and medical conditions.

Latest events

Following the establishment of a Currency Board in July and accompanying steps towards financial stabilisation, some positive results have already been witnessed. Inflation was low over the last three months of 1997 — although the average for 1997 remains critically high — and prices for basic products were generally stable. However unemployment continued to rise as more enterprises were closed as a result of radical structural reforms. This has had a serious impact on the situation of a large proportion of the population, where in many families both parents are unemployed.

The UNDP Early Warning Report, November 1997 (Findings and Recommendations) points to relative political stability, but also to a limited social security system and a substantial drop in living standards. In November 1997, 72% of respondents stated that their income was lower than the minimum level needed to survive. The financial burden on households is rising and current economic policies are not promoting coping mechanisms for the majority of the population. According to official statistics 85% of the population cannot afford appropriate nutrition: salaries only cover utility costs. Fruit and vegetable consumption is three times less than the European average, while meat and milk consumption is four times less.

The lack of adequate vitamin, protein, vegetable and animal fats in the average diet has had serious health, social and demographic consequences. Alcohol and drug abuse are on the increase. Infant

mortality rate reached 15/1000 in 1997, with a negative population growth of minus 5%. Poverty-related diseases are on the increase as immune systems are weakened by poor nutrition. 67.4% of the population suffer from frequent infectious diseases compared to 45.2% ten years ago. The country has also witnessed a dramatic increase in cardiovascular disease, tuberculosis (157 cases per 1000 in certain regions) and 15% of children are reported to have high blood pressure. Health problems begin during pregnancy. One in six babies is born prematurely and, due to poor nutrition during pregnancy, one in five babies up to one year of age suffers from dystrophy, hypertrophy, anaemia or other illnesses. Some 60% of children up to three years of age suffer from rachitis and 37% of primary school children in 1997 had spinal distortion or other bone deformations. During a recent Bulgarian Red Cross Society (BRCS) blood donation campaign, two thirds of those answering the NS's call for blood donations were rejected due to anaemia.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

In view of these worrying indicators BRCS has prioritised the provision of food to the most vulnerable, aiming to improve nutritional levels and therefore the health of beneficiaries.

Soup Kitchens •

During the reporting period 1,500 lone elderly persons received one hot meal a day, five days a week, in soup kitchens in 13 of Bulgaria's 28 regions. The value of the meal received is often larger than the beneficiary's income, as the programme covers beneficiaries who have no income or income which cannot cover power costs.

Family Parcels •

Since October 1997, the appeal target of 7,000 vulnerable low or no-income families have received a monthly food parcel containing: two kg rice, two kg wheat flour, two kg sugar, one packet of pasta, one bottle of vegetable oil and one tin of meat. The value of the food parcel is 20-30% of the monthly income of most vulnerable families, and up to 50% in certain cases. Although the parcel does not cover the total monthly family food needs, beneficiaries are able to survive due to this support.

Food Coupons •

3,000 pupils aged seven to 14 from vulnerable families were provided with a free meal in their school canteen (breakfast or hot midday meal). This meal represents 20% of the value of a family's daily expenditure for food and in some cases is the only meal pupils receive. Those absent one day were replaced by another pupil on the waiting list. In addition to the nutritional value of the programme, the project also motivates school attendance.

Baby Food •

2,000 babies are supported with food, based on the nutritional recommendations of the Ministry of Health for infants from four to 12 months. Families receive one kg milk powder, three packets of porridge and sixteen jars of baby food puree per month. Beneficiaries were selected on the basis of doctors' recommendations.

Elderly Food Parcel Programme w

The seven month programme of support to 97,000 elderly persons over 65 years of age — funded by USAID through the American Red Cross — began with delivery of food stocks from the port of Burgas to five central warehouses, and from there to BRCS regional committees. Micro-distribution began in December.

Outstanding needs

Due to a lack of resources the appeal target of 5,000 soup kitchen beneficiaries could not be met during the reporting period. The provision of one hot meal a day to the current level of 1,500 elderly beneficiaries will continue over the next two and a half months, with a further 1,500 beneficiaries to be

covered from January. However, funding is sought to continue the programme after March 1998. Similarly, the family food parcel programme seeks funding to ensure the continuation of the programme from the end of March. Current donations will ensure distribution during the first three months of 1998 only. The programme providing dry milk to 8,000 children in state social institutions and the school food coupon programme are also urgently in need of support.

As the incidence of poverty-related illnesses increases throughout the country, BRCS continues to seek funding to implement a health education campaign, targeting vulnerable groups at risk. Restructuring and confusion in the state health sector means that limited resources are available to treat patients. The National Society programme therefore seeks to prevent further increases in a number of common diseases and medical conditions. As it addresses the threat facing the general health of increasing numbers of the population, BRCS has also identified a need for the micro-distribution of medicines to selected beneficiaries at home, through local doctors. Other organisations are already distributing medicines to hospitals and larger institutions. Depending on the availability of funds, the National Society will introduce a programme targeting the medicinal needs of individuals on a local basis.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

BRCS continues to act in close co-operation with other humanitarian organisations in the country to co-ordinate the distribution of aid in response to the needs of the most vulnerable. A National Society representative participates at World Bank donors' meetings to co-ordinate humanitarian aid in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Red Cross produces a weekly newsletter which is distributed to donors, embassies, UN, EU, World Bank and other interested organisations within the country. During the Christmas/New Year period, the Head of Regional Delegation in Budapest made two television and two radio programmes in Bulgaria, focusing on the Federation's 1998 Appeal.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The winter has been extremely harsh in Bulgaria, and donations in response to the appeal have been insufficient to implement the programmes as planned. Unless nutritional levels can be improved amongst all groups of the population, the incidence of poverty-related diseases will increase and the health situation in general will continue to decline, placing place further pressure on the state health and social security system. The poor response to the International Federation's revised appeal 2/97 has put in danger in the survival of BRCS beneficiaries. If funds are not made available BRCS will be forced to stop some of its assistance programmes during the toughest part of the winter.

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