

# **BULGARIA:**

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISLOCATION**

15 April 1998

*appeal no. 18/96 - 02/97*

*situation report no. 5*

*period covered: 10 December 1997 - 1 March 1998*

---

*Focusing on assistance to low or no income families who fall outside a flimsy state social security net, the Bulgarian Red Cross continued to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in the country over the harsh winter. Although the soup kitchen, family food parcel and baby food programmes survived over the winter, the National Society faces a major challenge in the face of declining donor interest.*

---

### ***The context***

In April 1997 the Bulgarian government committed itself to a strict programme of budgetary discipline, increased banking supervision and radical structural reform. As a result unemployment has risen steeply and a substantial drop has been witnessed in the per capita income of the poorest households. With large parts of the population struggling to cover basic energy costs, little money is left over for food, clothing and medicines. Although the government has made efforts to build an emergency social security net state aid remains limited and the continuation of humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable is vital. In October 1996, the International Federation launched an initial emergency appeal for Bulgaria. This was followed by a revised appeal in February 1997, and a further revision in July, to reflect the continuing economic deterioration. 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 common diseases.

## *Latest events*

Although some economic stabilisation has taken place since the introduction of government reforms, the expected accompanying improvement in living standards has not yet materialised. Impoverishment and pessimism have reached critical levels according to the UNDP Early Warning Report, January 1998.

Poverty, stress and inadequate nutrition have produced negative social, health and demographic results. Life expectancy continues to fall, whilst low birth rates and high mortality rates have led to an overall decrease in the population. The elderly are particularly at risk with poverty and ill health making them more dependent on external support. Also at risk are the sick, disabled, those living alone or in remote areas and non-Bulgarian ethnic groups.

The health care system in Bulgaria has virtually collapsed. Although reform is on-going budgetary constraints mean that the Ministry of Health will not be able to provide sufficient medicines for those in need.

## *Red Cross/Red Crescent action*

Against this sombre background the Bulgarian Red Cross Society (BRCS) is struggling to maintain its social assistance programmes, focusing on aid to low or no-income families through the provision of one free meal a day through soup kitchens, assistance to families with unemployed members through a monthly food parcel, and food support to babies from single parent or no-income families. BRCS also targets the most vulnerable who fall outside the normal social security net, due to sudden poverty brought about by illness or social circumstances.

### **Soup Kitchens •**

This programme remains a priority as it is the most efficient way to provide what is often the only daily meal and social contact for its beneficiaries. Soup kitchen coupons were distributed to people with no or low incomes, prioritising the handicapped or elderly who are unable to prepare their own meals. During the winter the sick or disabled were able to take their meals home or the food was delivered by Red Cross volunteers. In December 1,500 beneficiaries received a meal five days a week through 13 soup kitchens. In January the number of soup kitchens increased to 14 covering 1,550 beneficiaries. Since the beginning of February, a further 11 soup kitchens have been opened covering an additional 1,500 beneficiaries, bringing the total to 3,050 for the month.

### **Family Parcels •**

From December to March a total of 7,000 family parcels were distributed each month covering the 28 regions of the country. Beneficiaries were no or low income families with unemployed members. The parcel contents are intended for a family of four or more and contain one month's supply of basic food items. In addition, other food and non-food items were received from donors and distributed to the most vulnerable families or through soup kitchens.

### **Baby Food •**

Food for 1,400 babies was distributed in December and for 2,000 babies in January and February to single parent families with monthly incomes below the minimum level.

### **Elderly Food Parcel Programme w**

Food support to 97,600 elderly persons over 65 years of age, funded by USAID through the American Red Cross, continues. Beneficiaries receive 5 kg flour, 1 kg vegetable oil and 1 kg beans each month. A joint BRCS/American Red Cross assessment has been made to review both the needs of this age group and the results of the project.

### **Transport •**

A new truck was bought during the reporting period which will increase the logistical capacity of the National Society. Two new forklift trucks were also purchased for the central warehouse.

## ***Outstanding needs***

BRCS needs financial support to distribute dry milk to 8,000 children in state social institutions as set out in the appeal. This programme could not be implemented during the reporting period due to a lack of funds.

The future of the soup kitchens programme is at risk unless further donations are received. Drawing on its own reserves, BRCS was able to ensure the continuity of the programme over the harsh winter months, but further support is urgently sought.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

The Bulgarian Prime Minister recently visited BRCS headquarters to pay tribute to the work of the National Society during this difficult transition period. Red Cross property restitution, the need for a suitable headquarters building and further support to the NS were discussed. BRCS continues to work in close co-operation with other humanitarian organisations in the country, as well as the Ministries of Labour and Social Welfare, Health, various medical institutions and local authorities. The National Society is represented at the monthly UNDP-organised donor meetings in Sofia, and produces a monthly newsletter which is distributed to donors, embassies, UN, EU, World Bank and other interested organisations. Press conferences are organised on a regular basis.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details. For more information donors are invited to contact Leopoldo Principe, Desk Officer, at ++4122 7304319, email: [principe@ifrc.org](mailto:principe@ifrc.org)

## ***Conclusion***

Thanks to a number of cash and in-kind donations received during the winter, BRCS was able to ensure the continuation of its soup kitchens, family food parcels and baby food programmes, albeit at levels below those envisaged in the emergency appeal. To continue these vital programmes until the results of the government's financial, economic and health reforms are felt by the most vulnerable, the National Society is appealing for further support. Although strict economic measures have been taken by the government and reform of the health system is underway, it is not expected that the results of these efforts will filter through to the most vulnerable households for some time to come.

Peter Rees-Gildea  
Director  
Operations Fundraising and Reporting Department

Renny Nancholas  
Director  
Europe Department