

MADAGASCAR: CYCLONE GRETELLE

appeal no. 03/97

sitrep no. 1

for the period: 1 April to 15 May 1997

23 May 1997

The Context

Cyclone Gretelle swept through south eastern Madagascar on 24 and 25 January 1997, affecting approximately half a million persons, 42,000 of whom are among the most vulnerable in the mountain area of Midongy and Befotaka districts. Roads and bridges were washed out, preventing access by land to these districts. Based on preliminary estimates by Care International, work to open up these zones will not be completed before July 1997.

Food is the major problem. The inhabitants could not harvest their crops in March as they were under water and partly destroyed. Other crops such as coffee, cassava and breadfruit tree which traditionally generated additional income and assured the tide-over between the two crops have also been partially destroyed.

The Malagasy Red Cross asked the Federation to launch an appeal for CHF 885,000 to assist 42,000 of the most vulnerable persons in Befotaka and Midongy districts. This initial appeal was increased to CHF 1,534,000 at the beginning of April in order to respond better to the victims' needs. Fifty per cent of the appeal has been covered mainly by the European Community via the French Red Cross and several National Red Cross Societies.

Recent Events

Flying donations to Midongy and Befotaka has in general not run into problems, but is quite expensive. During the first week of May the operation was interrupted due to poor weather conditions which prevented the Antonov 2 (the plane for the operation) from flying. Everything is going well now, with good co-operation from the authorities and more clement weather. Food distributions are being pursued as planned. The Red Cross has worked in the afflicted zone since 6 February and obtained the following information:

Midongy and Befotaka.

The situation has regularly improved in these two communes since the beginning of last month. The delegates were able to assess the prevailing situation better during food distributions. The opening of the road between Vangaindrano and Midongy is a good step in the right direction.

At Midongy the zone was under so much water that the inhabitants were in a precarious situation. The Red Cross was able to provide for the most urgent needs and the following observations have recently been made:

Agriculture.

Rice is the staple crop and there are usually two harvests a year: one in April (Tavial or mountain rice) and the other in December (major harvest). The cyclone struck at the end of January; rice had therefore been harvested in December, preventing a sudden deterioration of the nutritional situation. Rice seed is in short supply in certain villages now mainly because houses were flooded.

The population harvests mountain rice as from April. It is again on the market and the price is dropping. Note should be taken that this harvest is always insufficient and that it is always necessary to wait for the big harvest at the end of May on the coast to feed Midongy.

The population has been growing a little maize, potatoes, cassava, beans and ground nuts for three months in order to cover the shortfall. The harvest should be ready at the beginning of June and appears to be developing normally.

Economy.

The price of basic crops has remained high for a long time at Midongy mainly because the road linking Ranomena and Midongy (52 kms) was out for quite some time and the goods had to be hand carried to Midongy at the exorbitant cost of FMG/kg 1,500 (compared to FMG/kg 250 by vehicle). Rice which usually costs between FMG/kg 1,600 and 1,700 doubled or tripled.

The Ranomena - Midongy road, repaired by CARE, should be usable at the end of May 1997. 2,000 persons are working on it (700 from Migongy, 1 person per family). CARE's "cash for work" programme, in addition to the Red Cross food distribution, has completely revived the economy in the zone with a population of 6,000 persons averaging 6 persons per family, and prices have gone up.

Befotaka.

Access to the town of Befotaka is still a major problem. The landing strip is 25 kms from the town (at Beharena). As the roads have not been maintained since 1963 the area is quite remote even without a cyclone. Since 1963 merchandise has been transported by human beings.

In some villages surrounding Befotaka there are still pockets where the situation is very difficult as the roads are impracticable. In the entire zone, a potato, cassava and ground nut harvest is expected in June and maize has already been harvested in some places. Milk products are available on the market.

Care's "cash for work" programme should soon begin to give results in this zone, giving a boost to the economy.

Farafangana and Vangaindrano.

The situation in these two places remains difficult, partially owing to Cyclone Gretelle and partially owing to the prevailing poverty in this coastal zone. This region greatly depends on its crops, such as coffee, cloves and pepper.

Medical.

The major problem in the south east region for quite some time has been the lack of drinking water and hygiene. Only surface water is used for all needs. Fire wood is in short supply in this region; food is not really cooked and water almost never boiled.

Apart from the chief town of Midongy, the inhabitants of the villages do not have access to health care or primary health care training. The villages are quite distant from the health centres and sometimes not even connected by roads. Families are big; it is quite common in the region for a women to have more than ten children. Child mortality is high.

Malnutrition.

The situation has improved quickly over the past three months because of the Red Cross food distributions. Doctors in Befotaka have reported only 50 out of 6,400 children might be malnourished. At Midongy the Federation /MRC nursing delegate made tests which showed that only 1% of children under five suffered from severe malnutrition.

Recent evaluations made by CARE in the coastal zone also show severe malnutrition affects <2% of children under 5 years old.

Malagasy Red Cross/Federation Action

The preliminary objective - to prevent a rapid deterioration of the condition of the 42,000 victims of Cyclone Gretelle in the area of Midongy and Befotaka - is almost achieved. 170 MT of foodstuffs have been distributed since the beginning of the operation. If the Red Cross objectives for the coming two months are achieved, the situation will almost be back to normal, thanks also to the reopening of the road.

The second objective - to target the most vulnerable among the vulnerable population in order to better respond to their need - has been 80% achieved. About 20,000 beneficiaries will be targeted in May and June. Seed has been distributed in the area since the beginning of the programme.

The third objective - related to the National Society - has been 85% achieved. The response of the Malagasy Red Cross volunteers was impressive. 450 members are participating in the Gretelle operation with two Federation delegates based on Farafangana.

The fourth objective is to open Red Cross nutrition centres (CRENA) at Vangaindrano and Farafangana, operational since mid-April. Currently 2,500 children and persons accompanying them receive food support every week.

The Red Cross also provided 6.5 tonnes of rice, 1.5 tonnes of beans, 80 litres of oil and 200 blankets to MSF-F (Médecins Sans Frontières-France) for their nutrition centre in the area. The religious communities also received 5 tonnes of rice, 1 tonne of beans and 400 litres of oil from the Red Cross for the victims of Cyclone Gretelle. The Malagasy Red Cross /Federation are also providing food for 150 persons at the Vangaindrano leprosarium

Needs

Financial support is required for the last phase of the programme in order to successfully complete the operation and provide support for the victims of Gretelle.

Development

The emergency phase of "Gretelle" is drawing to an end. For the future a disaster preparedness programme must be set up for disaster-prone Madagascar. This is a long-term objective with a development delegate based on the island.

Two market-garden and dairy mini projects will soon be set up in the south east to enable the Malagasy local branches to be self reliant in the future.

The members of the MRC local branches are quite motivated and have good potential. Now that "Gretelle" has renewed the vigour of the volunteers, self-financed projects must be immediately established. Some branches have already expressed the desire to implement certain food industry projects which are realistic and require little investment.

Red Cross personnel.

Three Federation delegates and one French Red Cross delegate, with the support of the Malagasy Red Cross local branches in Fianarantsoa, Farafangana, Vangaindrano, Befotaka, Midongy and the national headquarters at Antannarivo, are carrying out the operations.

Estimate

The positive results of the Red Cross food distributions among the populations in Befotaka and Midongy allow us to better target the most vulnerable population in May and June. There will also be distributions of blankets (Swiss Red Cross), clothing (Seychelles Red Cross), cooking sets (Red Cross of Monaco) and soap.

Conclusion

The emergency phase is almost over and the programme should be closed down in the coming months. However Gretelle should be followed by a disaster preparedness and primary health development programme.

The Malagasy Red Cross and Federation operation is unfolding as planned and appreciated by the disaster-prone population of Madagascar. The relief operation has been reoriented for May and June with the most vulnerable being better targeted.

This operation was a success thanks to the good support from ECHO and the different National Red Cross Societies. The Secretariat in Geneva, the Regional Delegation in Nairobi and the Delegation in Madagascar are grateful for this support and are at your disposal for further information. Further financial support is however required in order to successfully complete the last stage of the programme.

Bekele Geleta
Director,
Africa Department

Ann Naef
Acting Head
Appeals and Reports
Service