

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: FLOODS

12 May 1998

appeal no. 12/97

situation report no. 6 (final)

period covered: 9 October 1997 - 6 May 1998

This Appeal, responding to the huge needs of hundreds of thousands of flood affected persons in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, was fully covered. The generous response of donors, backed up by a similar gesture from local communities, allowed all aspects of the operation (emergency relief, post-emergency relief, and rehabilitation) to be effected. Problems with communications and lack of Disaster Preparedness know-how were surmounted and valuable lessons were learned.

The Disaster

In July and August freak weather conditions in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary caused widespread damage and destruction to buildings, roads, agricultural land, communication lines and infrastructure. In Poland, heavy rain over a prolonged period of time caused extensive flooding in 26 out of 49 vojvodships (districts), hitting the south and west of the country, concentrated along the Odra and Wisla rivers and beginning on 7 July. In the Czech Republic the nature of the flooding differed slightly, with the rain causing flash flooding from 6 July, which took villages and rural communities in Moravia and eastern Bohemia by surprise. In Slovakia districts mainly in the west of the country (Zilina, Cadca and Senica) were affected by the floods, whilst in Hungary, high winds and hail storms struck counties in the Northeast of the country (Szabolcs-Szatmar and Hajdu), one of the country's poorest regions.

In Poland 54 persons were killed by the floods and over 160,000 evacuated from their homes. More than 3,000 families lost their homes and belongings, including crops and livestock. Some 71 hospitals, 190 health care centres, 937 schools, seven waste dumps and 67 purification plants were flooded. In the Czech Republic over 40 people were killed and more than 60,000 evacuated from their homes. Wind and hail damage to some 530 houses in Hungary affecting over 900 people was estimated at CHF 250,000. The destruction of crops severely reduced future income sources for families in the affected region.

Official estimates of rehabilitation and reconstruction needs following the floods put the figure at over USD 3 billion for the region. Estimates in Poland indicate that assistance for flood victims will be necessary for the next 2-3 years, and in the case of the most vulnerable social groups, for up to 10 years.

The Appeal

On 14 July, the International Federation launched an emergency appeal seeking CHF 6,960,000 in cash, kind and services to assist 257,000 victims of the floods in the region. The appeal was fully covered through cash and in-kind donations from donor National Societies, governments, and two ECHO-funded projects. The beneficiaries targeted were the most vulnerable victims of the floods, both amongst the

populations which remained in the flooded areas and those which were evacuated from their homes, including the elderly, young children, low or no-income families and the handicapped.

The Operation

The Operation was divided into three basic phases: emergency relief, post-emergency relief and rehabilitation. The emergency relief phase began just prior to the launch of the appeal, with the National Societies involved releasing warehouse relief stocks from 6 and 7 July. The post-emergency phase began once flood waters had receded at the beginning of August. The rehabilitation phase is on-going.

Emergency Phase •

The aim was to provide basic food, water, hygiene items, blankets, bed sheets and detergents to victims of the floods, targeting those who lost their belongings, or who were forced to leave their homes with the minimum of belongings. Transportation, distribution and National Society personnel and administrative costs were also included in the plan of action and proposed budget

Planned Programmes as per appeal •

Poland: Basic food and hygiene parcels for 20,000 families for one month, 20,000 blankets, bed sheets, detergents, five water purification teams to provide safe drinking water.

Czech Republic: Basic food and hygiene parcels for 30,000 families for one month. 30,000 blankets, bed sheets, detergents.

Slovakia: Drinking water for 5,000 people for two weeks, 760 baby food parcels and 100 lifesaving jackets.

Hungary: Food and hygiene parcels to cover the needs of 1,000 families for one month, 250 blankets.

Actual Programmes •

Poland

Food Programme

Immediately following the onset of the floods, the Polish Red Cross used emergency appeal funds to procure basic food items for beneficiaries in the affected districts of Walbrzych, Jelenia Gora, Bielsko-Biala, Opole, Katowice, Tarnobrzeg, Wroclaw, Rzeszow, Czestochowa, Krakow, Nowy Sacz and Gorzow. The food items were procured either at national level by headquarters or locally by the branches in the affected districts with money transferred from the headquarters to reflect local needs. The method of distribution (either by food parcels, in bulk, in collective centres or summer camps for child victims of the floods) was decided on individually by the branches, taking into consideration volunteer and transportation availability. The programme benefited over 9,000 people — the elderly, sick, handicapped and low-income families with more than two children. An additional bulk food and hygiene distribution programme was organised targeting the following districts: Czestochowa, Bielsko Biala, Katowice, Kielce, Krakow, Legnica, Opole, Rzeszow, Tarnobrzeg, Tarnow, Walbrzych, and Zielona Gora, benefiting 8,640 families.

In addition, specific programmes were implemented with earmarked donor contributions received in cash or in-kind in response to the appeal. Thanks to Danish RC funding, 10,000 low-income families with many children, sick or elderly persons in the district of Zielona Gora received locally procured bulk food items totalling some 115,000 kg. A total of 7,200 food parcels were received in-kind from the Belgian RC and distributed to victims of the floods in Katowice, Opole and Walbrzych districts in southern Poland. Via Netherlands RC funding, 1,250 families in Wroclaw district received four food parcels and fresh bread over a period of one month and 4,320 families in Jelenia Gora, Walbrzych and Gorzow Wielkopolski received food packages — both programmes involving in-kind donations. Through the first ECHO-funded programme, 3,000 families in southern Poland received four food parcels over a four week period. In total over 43,000 families were assisted through the food programme

Hygiene Programme

In addition to the large scale bulk hygiene and food distribution a number of specific programmes were implemented with earmarked donor funding. The first ECHO-funded programme provided 3,000 families

in southern Poland with one hygiene parcel and detergent over a four week period. A Netherlands RC contribution provided 2,000 families in Walbrzych district with kits (in-kind) containing hygiene and basic household items and 1,250 beneficiaries in Wroclaw received two hygiene parcels, blankets and bed linen sets over a period of one month. The Finnish RC funded hygiene parcels (containing detergent, washing powder, basic household cleaning items) were purchased and distributed in the districts of Zielona Gora (2,000), Legnica (2,000) and Wroclaw (2,200), and a German RC contribution provided locally procured hygiene parcels for 3,340 families affected by the floods in Katowice (1,340) and Walbrzych (2,000) districts. In addition, 3,500 hygiene and 1,500 sanitation/cleaning parcels were received in-kind from the Spanish RC and distributed through branches in Legnica. Nearly 29,500 families benefited from the hygiene programme.

Blankets/Bed-linen and Basic Household Items

The purchase and distribution of blankets, bed linen and basic household items spanned the emergency relief, post emergency and rehabilitation phases. Blankets and bed linen were distributed early in the operation to those beneficiaries whose belongings were either destroyed or left behind in the flooded areas. A total of 10,000 blankets were received in kind from the Swiss RC and distributed through Red Cross branches in Legnica, Walbrzych, Krakow, Rzeszow, Katowice, Gorzow and Wielkopolski. Under the first ECHO contract 2,000 families were provided with blankets and bed sheets and within the second ECHO programme, 21,000 households sets (bed linen, cutlery, plates and pot sets) were distributed to provide the minimum items to facilitate recovery following the flooding.

Water Supply

As a result of the flooding, the local supply of safe drinking water was disrupted in many localities in the south west of Poland. In response to the appeal, at the beginning of the emergency, four German Red Cross mobile water sanitation units were deployed to the area of Wroclaw, Raciborz and Slubice, and from 17 July began producing 120,000 litres of drinking water daily for 12,000 beneficiaries. Situation reports from the field and discussions with local authorities indicated that water purification and distribution services were still required at the end of July and would be needed for a further month, in localities still not reconnected to regular water supplies. The deployment costs for one month of three water sanitation units were covered by the second ECHO-funded project. The programme also included the costs of four water tankers to transport drinking water to other supply points in the region. Drinking water was produced 24 hours a day, with transport to the supply points effected 16 hours a day. By the end of August, local water supply systems were reconnected and local water works could resume their activities.

Czech Republic

General Operation

From the outset of the flooding, the Czech Red Cross distributed food, drinking water, hygiene items, disinfectants, insect repellents, bed linen, blankets, working clothes and other basic material in bulk to the affected populations in the districts of Zlin, Ostrava, Olomouc, Vsetin, Uher. Hradiste, Opava, Hodonin, Bruntal, N. Jicin, Pferov, Kromeriz and Brno. The majority of relief items were purchased by the headquarters and distributed to branches in accordance with needs. Transportation and distribution costs were also covered by the funds received in response to the emergency appeal. In addition to the general relief operation, specific programmes were carried out with particular donor contributions.

A programme addressing the needs of local populations identified during the cleaning up phase after the flood waters had receded was made possible thanks to a Netherlands RC contribution, focusing on providing cleaning materials, working gloves, insecticides and repellents to protect those involved in the clean up operation against the large numbers of mosquitoes which gathered in the damp, humid flooded areas. Towels and dish towels were also distributed to vulnerable low-income families to facilitate their return home

ECHO I and II

Within the first ECHO-funded programme 30,000 beneficiaries in the region of Moravia received basic relief assistance through the distribution of canned foodstuffs, milk, bottled water, blankets and hygiene items. The second ECHO programme focused on post emergency needs of the affected populations. Food

was provided for canteens in collective centres, accommodating those evacuated from their homes and working on repairs to their houses. Detergents, disinfectants, fungicide and insecticide was also distributed to those working on repairs and basic household items (pillows, pillow cases, and bed sheets) distributed to returning local populations who had suffered the partial or total destruction of their personal belongings.

Slovakia

Baby food programme

Within this programme a total of 584 baby food parcels were procured and distributed (348 through the ECHO-funded project and 236 with Netherlands RC funding) to the districts of Senica (169), Zilina (99), Cadca (249), Trencin (22) and Presov (45). Originally 760 beneficiaries were planned, however following branch assessment of needs, only 584 families were identified as in need of assistance, as other needs had been covered by donations received nationally

Provision of drinking water

A limited amount of drinking water supplies for remote villages in the flood affected district of Senica (Sobotiste, Radosovce, Kuklov, Dubovce, Popudinske Moci dlany and Lopasov) and in the immediate vicinity of Bratislava, and related transportation and distribution costs, were covered by the appeal (Netherlands RC funding). As water supplies were largely provided free of charge by donors in response to the national appeal, the appeal funds were used to cover transportation and distribution costs.

Life Jacket Programme

Eighty life jackets were procured and distributed to water rescue service workers in Senica district (48 with Netherlands RC funding), where the danger of dams bursting forced the evacuation of local populations.

Hungary

The relief operation in Hungary benefited some 1,072 families — victims of the storms in Szablocs-Szatmar-Bereg district. An initial 500 large food and hygiene parcels were distributed to low-income families whose source of income or homes were affected by the freak weather conditions. A further 500 smaller follow-on food hygiene parcels and 572 combined food and hygiene parcels were distributed to support other families whose livelihood was seriously threatened by damage to agricultural land and crops.

The Delegation

The Regional Delegation in Budapest co-ordinated the relief operation through five delegates: the Head of Regional Delegation, two Development Delegates (one based in Poland), Information Officer and Finance Delegate. In addition one logistics/relief co-ordinator from the Belgrade Delegation carried out a 1.5 month mission to assist the Czech and Polish Red Cross with programme and budget planning and specifically with the preparation of the ECHO applications. In September a relief co-ordinator was engaged for a period of four months to assist the Polish and Czech Red Cross with monitoring and reporting on the ECHO contract. The delegate was based in Warsaw.

Participation of Operating National Societies

All four Red Cross National Societies played a major leading role in the operation, in planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting phases. Support was provided by the Regional Delegation for initial planning, monitoring and reporting due to the NS lack of previous experience of such a large scale disaster. Implementation was, however, carried out solely by the ONSs.

Czech Red Cross: From 6 July 93% of local RC branches were mobilised. Those not directly involved in the relief operation organised the collection of donations from the general public. Over 300 persons worked in task forces at local branch level and some 2,000 volunteers assisted with the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid. The Red Cross mountain rescue service began rescue operations on 6 and 7 July and

the water life saving service was involved in operations from 6 to 30 July in 27 places. A central Czech RC task force was set up at headquarters level to co-ordinate relief efforts with external bodies.

Polish Red Cross: The NS operation began with the mobilisation of its seven main warehouses where relief items for 20,000 people are stored. Donations from the general public collected by the headquarters were sent to the branches for distribution by volunteers. A number of NS rescue groups were put into action and the branches were involved in evacuation and early warning systems in some districts. The NS provided food, water, medical, clothing, hygiene and other relief assistance. During the rehabilitation phase, some branches of the NS developed psychological assistance activities for victims of the floods.

Slovak Red Cross: The floods affected eight RC branches, with only one branch mobilised during the warning and emergency phase. The other seven were active in the rehabilitation phase. National Society staff were involved in providing medical, food, water, hygiene, clothing, financial assistance and counselling.

Co-operation with Authorities and Other Agencies

The National Societies co-ordinated their relief efforts with local authorities and other humanitarian aid agencies in order to render the most effective service and to avoid duplication of effort. The exchange of information was essential.

Although there was often a lack of effective agreements with local governments and other organisations specifying roles in the time of disaster, and although local authorities did not always see the Red Cross as a Disaster Preparedness (DP) partner at the onset of the disaster, the work and achievements of the NS during the operation improved both their public image and national credibility as an effective DP partner. The operation also allowed for the development of better co-operation with local authorities and other humanitarian aid partners.

Analysis of the Operation

Needs Assessment •

The nature and scale of the disaster made it very difficult for the National Societies to carry out an extensive needs assessment during the emergency phase. The NSs relied on their strong branch network to feed back beneficiary needs from the affected areas, together with information received from various partners such as local authorities. The enormous quantity of in-kind assistance received in response to national appeals was therefore co-ordinated by the NS headquarters and transported to branches according to specific needs. Due to problems in carrying out needs assessment before implementation of the operation began, the plan of action as set out in the appeal was modified as more information was received.

As the operation advanced to the post-emergency and rehabilitation stages in August 1997, NSs were able to carry out extensive needs assessments of the affected populations to identify continuing emergency relief requirements and longer term requirements to facilitate a return to normalcy for those whose property and belongings were destroyed. All NSs relied on their branches and co-operation with local municipality bodies, social welfare offices and other local humanitarian aid agencies to collect this data. Regular needs assessments were carried out during the autumn and winter to identify outstanding rehabilitation needs. The main beneficiary groups targeted by the operation were those who were already considered vulnerable before the floods and whose situation had deteriorated as a result. This included the elderly, sick, handicapped and low or no-income families with many children. A number of government assistance schemes were set up to help flood victims, however those with unstable income sources were often not able to benefit from government-supported bank loans or credits. These groups were targeted through National Society operations.

Objectives/Plan of Action

Modifications •

The basic objective to provide emergency relief assistance in the form of food, water, hygiene items, detergent, blankets and bed sheets was appropriate to the disaster and formed the basis of the emergency appeal. However the plan of action drawn up for the appeal could not, and did not, take into account at that time the unexpected tremendous response to national appeals from the National Societies in their individual countries. In Poland over 14,000 tons of in-kind donations were received from the general public/companies/sponsors in a value of PLN 24,000,000 (approx. CHF 10.3 million) and over PLN 12,000,000 (approx. CHF 6 million) was received in cash through the national appeal. A similar response was witnessed in the Czech Republic, where 9,000 tons of relief items were distributed and over 260 million crowns (approx. CHF 12 million) received. The National Societies provided the main vehicles for the distribution of these donations.

The response to the national appeals therefore had a major impact on implementation of the operation. Initial food, water and hygiene need estimates had to be revised, as well as the method of distribution. Food needs were covered to a large degree by local in-kind donations. The budget line for food was therefore used to cover other outstanding relief needs (clothing, working materials, candles, waste bags, brushes, insecticides and fungicides), transportation costs to ensure distribution of locally received donations and also for longer term rehabilitation needs (basic household items to replace those destroyed), which were not initially envisaged in the emergency appeal.

Distribution methods were also revised during the operation. Instead of food and hygiene parcels, items were delivered in bulk by the Czech Red Cross. This reduced packaging costs and provided the NS with more flexibility in responding to specific local needs. In Poland, bulk distribution was also preferred for the second phase of the food and hygiene programmes.

Operational Concerns •

Communications were an initial problem for the National Societies. Traditional methods of communication broke down during the emergency phase, although this was partially addressed once cellular telephones were made available (within Polish RC). Information lines also suffered between headquarters and branches. Branch and headquarters capacity was stretched to the limit to respond to the unprecedented scale of the disaster. Little time was available to provide regular information updates.

In-kind donations from abroad were a cause of concern to both the International Federation and the National Societies. Where in-kind donations were received, the importance of providing administrative, distribution and transportation costs in the programme for both NS and Federation involvement was stressed, although not always adhered to by donors. As all relief items needed were available on the local market at reasonable prices, the most useful form of assistance was cash donations. This also allowed the NS to adapt their response to the latest needs, which were continually changing. It also avoided the burden of customs paper work and saved valuable staff time. For these reasons the Czech Red Cross insisted on cash donations only. The Polish RC experienced difficulties with uncoordinated individual donations which did not pass through other NS and which arrived at the Polish border without the required paperwork. Again valuable staff time was wasted.

Transportation and warehousing concerns were also experienced during the operation, due to the unprecedented scale of the disaster. These were mainly addressed through national donors, sponsors and volunteers who provided either vehicles or storage space free of charge. However for the longer term rehabilitation projects, these limitations had to be addressed and budget lines increased in project proposals.

The tremendous numbers of volunteers mobilised during the operation was essential to the effectiveness of the distribution process. Co-operation with local civil defence bodies also helped to secure access to the flooded areas to assist those cut off by the water.

Conclusions

Strengths and Achievements •

The excellent international response to the Emergency Appeal, together with local donations, meant that not only the emergency relief needs of the populations affected by the floods could be met, but that also a longer term approach to rehabilitation could be initiated. The strong branch networks and mobilisation of volunteers, vehicles and storage facilities were essential to the success of the operation, which boosted the profile of the National Societies in their individual countries enormously — with both the general public and local/central government and other DP partners.

Thanks to the flexibility of donors, funding was made available not only for the original plan of action as set out in the appeal, but also for long term rehabilitation projects, focusing on the provision of basic household items for those returning to properties which had been destroyed, and assistance to children from flood affected families through the winter via school canteens and winter clothing programmes. In Poland assistance for flood victims will be necessary for the next 2-3 years, and in the case of the weakest social groups, for up to 10 years. It is therefore vital that the Red Cross continues to assist affected groups.

Weaknesses •

Disaster preparedness plans and structures in the region, both on a national and Red Cross level were relatively weak when the disaster struck. Limited training of RC volunteers had taken place and the National Societies were not perceived as main partners in the disaster preparedness field. Flooding on this scale is unpredictable — last summer's freak weather conditions caused the worst flooding in the region in over a century. It is therefore very difficult to develop a sustainable DP capacity able to respond to a disaster on this scale. In this respect the limited headquarters and branch capacity, in terms of human and material resources, was a weakness in the operation. Although the tremendous response to the appeal was extremely welcome, this did put added pressure on all those involved in the NS operations to extend or create additional programmes. As the emphasis was on implementation of the programmes of assistance, limited time and resources were left for information and reporting requirements to satisfy donor needs.

The scale of the national response to the disaster was unexpected. The availability and distribution of in-kind donations received locally meant that the initial plan of action had to be revised. NS capacity limits were stretched in co-ordinating the distribution of relief whilst at the same time carrying out needs assessment to produce revised plans.

Follow-Up •

In order to address the issue of the role of the National Societies in national DP plans, a flood operation evaluation and review process has begun, bringing together the Polish, Czech, Slovak and German Red Cross (which was also involved in a flood operation on German territory) to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the Red Cross operations, in order to develop future strategies to strengthen NS disaster preparedness, including institutional structures, at both local and central levels. National Society reviews were carried out in early 1998 and an international meeting was held in March for the four National Societies, together with the International Federation and hosted by the German Red Cross. Discussions focused on the methods of preparing 2-3 year DP plans and the integration of the National Society into national DP plans. The National Societies are now preparing these plans to be presented to the German Red Cross and other potential donors for consideration for funding.

In addition to the review process, a number of rehabilitation programmes funded through the appeal are on-going. Branches of the Polish Red Cross are involved in school canteen programmes, supporting children from low-income families affected by the floods. A new programme to provide support to families involved in reconstruction of their homes is also to be presented to donors for their approval. The Czech Red Cross is involved in reconstruction and renovation projects with funds collected nationally. Projects are also expected from the NS to be implemented with appeal funding responding to outstanding rehabilitation needs.

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