

BELARUS, RUSSIAN FEDERATION, MOLDOVA, UKRAINE: Winter Emergency

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The distribution of winter clothing and family food parcels and the supply of hot meals continued on an increasing scale in all four countries. As an unusually protracted winter ends, some one million extremely vulnerable people will have received support through the worst months of the year.

The context

The Winter Appeal operation was launched in October 1997 with the aim of supporting the most vulnerable poor people during the cold winter period in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. Given the critical economic and social situation in all four countries, the activities initiated within the framework of the Winter Operation have been extended. Humanitarian aid supplied through the programme includes clothing, hot meals, food and hygiene parcels.

Belarus

The economy continues to recover with a 12% growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over January and February of 1998, compared with the same period last year. To a large extent, this is the result of pouring cheap credits into the economy, plus extensive trade with Russia. Much of this trade is done through barter transaction, particularly payments for gas and oil. The issue of inflation thus remains unresolved for the Belarus government and the real income of the population decreased 19% compared to December 1997. Inflation mainly affects those with fixed incomes such as pensioners and state employees.

Russia

The economy has continued to grow: GDP increased by 0.4% in 1997 -- the first rise since the transition period began -- with industrial output and agriculture expanding by 1.90% and 0.1% respectively. However, a combination of fallout from the Asian financial crisis and low international commodity prices are expected to limit further growth. Approval of the budget in March was achieved through concessions, including the government's decision to cut public expenditure evenly across the board (which will adversely affect spending on welfare, health etc.).

A rise in tax collection was partly responsible for the government's success in paying off pension arrears and budget sector wage arrears, but reports from the regions suggest arrears were rising again by late January, with doctors in 44 regions, and teachers in 25 regions not being paid on time. Much of last year's recovery was driven by domestic consumption; the average income rose faster than inflation (11% in 1997). However, according to Interfax, 21.8% of the population (32 million -- slightly up on last year) live below the official poverty line. The government's official subsistence wage is 423 roubles

(USD 70) per month. Official unemployment (based on ILO definitions) was stable at 9% at the end of 1997. Despite disagreement over the role played in living standards by the "shadow" economy, independent research suggests that 24% of Russians live in poverty, 44% are "getting by", 30% enjoy a good standard of living and only 2% are rich.

Ukraine

The number of people unemployed in Ukraine rose to 759,664 at the end of March from 724,273 in February, according to the State Statistics Committee. However, the level of unemployment is much higher since numerous enterprises have been idle the economic crisis, though their workers are still considered as employed. The domestic debt of Ukraine stands at USD 4.4 billion and the external debt at \$10.5 billion. The sum total of overdue wages and social benefits in Ukraine has increased 12.1% since the beginning of the year to USD 3.5 billion in April.

Moldova

Social and economic difficulties are primarily reflected in the country's health situation. Annually at least 3,000 people catch TB in Moldova. Last year, TB morbidity affected 58.9 people per 100,000 of population, while in some districts, such as Calarashi, Criuleni, Stranseni and Chisinau - Moldova's capital -- it was the highest rate of infection in Europe. According to the National Hygiene and Epidemiological Centre, the shortage of funds for medicines and medical equipment and the economic crisis are mainly to blame for the catastrophic situation.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Belarus v

The Winter Emergency Appeal (WEA) Programme focused on assistance to homeless and poor people, former prisoners, orphans, and large families.

In the first round of food parcel distributions: 6,896 parcels were given out in January, 3,722 in February and 1,049 in March -- totalling 11,667 parcels (the remainder left for Brest region in April). In January, in addition to the above categories of vulnerable, 100 food parcels were given to the most needy refugees. (For a detailed breakdown of distributions per region, see table No 1).

At the end of March, the Belarus Red Cross started *the second round* of food parcels distribution. In mid-February, 12,292 parcels were purchased for this round. In March, of 3,513 food parcels supplied under the second round to the regional RC Committees, 1,001 were distributed to the vulnerable, while the total amount of food parcels given out in March was 2,050 (in both rounds). In addition, two distributions of 100 parcels were made to the most needy refugees.

The Belarus RC is working with the following beneficiary figures: 7,783 lonely poor people, 2,267 large families, 1,465 orphans, 33 handicapped children, 62 homeless and/or unemployed people.

Soup kitchens: 6,222 hot meals were supplied in January (canteens opened only in the second week of the month), 8,625 meals in February and 16,646 in March. As of 1 April, there was sufficient funding for 3,547 hot meals. The canteens operate 5 days a week giving hot meals on average to 60 people per day per region. There are 12 canteens, located in the big cities. According to the Belarus RC, meals were provided to 2,235 beneficiaries, including 535 homeless people, 92 former prisoners, 329 orphans, 963 poor people and 316 children from large families. The soup kitchens are planned to continue until the end of May.

Belarus RC figures show 13,752 persons received **second-hand clothes** in March, donated by the Swedish and Danish Red Cross Societies (total weight received in December-January: 253.5 tonnes).

To maintain hygiene standards in the canteens and in the Medical and Social Welfare Centres, USD 6,400 were allocated for detergents. 148,000 syringes (sufficient for a year's supply) were purchased

and given to 438 Belarus RC Visiting Nurses, who care for lonely, elderly and handicapped people. (Approx. 330 syringes per Nurse).

Following completion of customs procedures, the second hand clothing and household goods, delivered by a Swiss Red Cross truck in mid March, were distributed to Belarus Red Cross Medical and Social Centres in April.

Besides the purchase of a computer and copier (see Sitrep no.3) for the Belarus RC HQs, certain expenses were allocated for warehousing and transport.

Russia v

Soup kitchens

The Russian Red Cross branches have made agreements with 16 local canteens in all nine regions to serve a full meal to beneficiaries. The average price per meal is 6.80 RUR (USD 1.13); it has been gradually reduced since the start of the programme, when it was more than USD 1.60, but this has not affected the quantity or quality. More than 24,000 hot meals were reported as being served during April (for 4,000 beneficiaries). Compared with figures from December 1997, the amount of hot meals served per month has been considerably increased. The number of "food coupons" issued to individuals varies from a one-day ration up to a 2-week ration.

Second hand clothes

Delivery of second hand clothes has generally worked well, although the British Red Cross donation from Oxfam earmarked for four republics was in customs for a long time before finally being released and distributed. However full reports have not yet been received from the regions. The co-operation between the local Russian RC branches and the authorities has run smoothly with two exceptions: in Mary El and Tuva the process has been slow due to lack of local government support. Overall, the quality has been very high with little waste, although there were several complaints that there was not enough winter outdoor clothes. The allocation between the regions has been well balanced in proportion to the population in need. During March and April another 15 consignments arrived, bringing the total to more than 1,050 MT. According to preliminary estimates from the region, at least 200,000 beneficiaries have received clothes during the WEA operation.

Family Food Parcels (FFP)

During March and April, 30,000 food parcels were produced for the second round and the majority distributed. The procurement contracts for the five producers were changed, from a pre-payment of 50% to the producer, to only 20% advance payment. In fact, in two cases, the producers are delivering the food parcels without any pre-payment. The new contracts, for the third round, completing the total production of 90,000 FFP, was signed in mid April enabling the Russian RC committees to finalise the distribution of the third round during the first half of May. Not all figures for April have been received yet but, according to the reports, 33,207 families (139,100 beneficiaries) have been receiving food parcels under the WEA programme.

The average price per food parcel has been significantly reduced, by USD 0.68 in comparison with the first pilot lot. The total savings amount to more than USD 46,000 for the second and third rounds of parcels.

Thanks to the fast response from the Secretariat in Geneva regarding the "new" procurement contracts, some of the time lost in November and December has been recovered, though the distribution of food parcels will still be about a month late, due to the May holidays (many enterprises being closed between 1-10 May).

Reports/Field Trips

One of the main problems in the programme remains the receiving of timely distribution and financial reports from the field. This is largely due to poor communication and distances between rayon committees and the regional head offices.

Field trips covering all the regions have continued throughout the period, most involving visits to the food parcel producers to sign contracts for the second and third rounds. The WEA team has spent considerable time and effort in Mary El and Tyva republics, meeting the Ministry of Social Welfare and other relevant authorities. Unfortunately, the distributions of second hand clothes and food parcels have decreased, mainly because the authorities have not fulfilled their commitments to cover transport costs to remote areas included in the programme. A contributing factor has been weak management; in both cases there has been poor contact between the Russian Red Cross chairladies and the regional authorities. However, matters now appear resolved and the relevant authorities renewed their commitments to the WEA team. In Mary El an extra person has been brought in to support the regional RC committee and there has been a change in the distribution of family food parcels, giving slightly more to the neighbouring Chuvashia republic.

At the end of March, three monitors were hired to make a complete survey in all nine republics where the WEA programme is being implemented. Their role is to interview beneficiaries, visit the distribution points, monitor the food parcel production, carry out spot checks on the warehouses, and check the food parcels contents. Six republics have been covered so far. All reports will be compiled to give a full picture of how the programme is running.

A workshop is planned in Moscow from 7 to 9 June. The participants will be the chairpeople from all the WEA regions, the monitors and the WEA team. Apart from sharing experiences, the workshop will aim to get a full understanding of the weak points, strong points, difficulties encountered and what changes could be made to achieve more impact in future.

Ukraine v

Funding provided by the Norwegian Red Cross (approximately USD 342,932) was transferred to the Ukrainian Red Cross in three instalments under the WEA operation agreement between the Federation and the Ukrainian Red Cross. A further donation of USD 211,000 is expected from the Canadian Red Cross.

According to the Ukrainian Red Cross, the Norwegian funding financed the purchase and distribution of 65,654 food parcels. (See table 3). To cover as many beneficiaries as possible, the Ukrainian Red Cross reduced significantly the average price of a food parcel. Nevertheless, the number of beneficiaries remains well below the target of 150,000. (Food parcels are given to different beneficiaries each time.)

Lviv region alone in Ukraine was allocated Norwegian funding to run seven soup kitchens (one in Lviv city and six in regional towns). On average, each month 263 lonely and elderly people in the region received a daily meal. The average price of a meal is approximately USD 0.65. Every month, the local Red Cross Committee changes the lists of beneficiaries to assist as many people as possible. Funds were transferred to the Lviv Red Cross so that soup kitchens continued throughout April. (Soup kitchens are operational in 11 regions of Ukraine within the bilateral project between the Netherlands and Ukrainian Red Cross Societies.)

The Crimea peninsula has a significant drinking water problem. It was therefore decided to buy 300 water filters to improve the water quality. Most of these were distributed among the Tartar returnees who, after 40 years' exile, are returning in hundreds of thousands, and are unable to find suitable living conditions. Food parcels were also distributed in the area. The Ivano-Frankivsk region also bought 300 water filters.

Despite limited funding, the Ukrainian Red Cross has been running the WEA operation in all 27 regions, maximising the use of local human resources, goods and services, which are often cheaper than imported equivalents, thus allowing cost-effective assistance to the huge numbers of socially vulnerable. The NS estimates a saving of approx. USD 19,770. Some 422 so-called "clothes banks" were organised at the local Red Cross branches to collect second-hand clothes from the local population. After sorting, cleaning and mending, these clothes were given to the vulnerable.

Second hand clothing was donated by the Swedish and Danish Red Cross Societies. The Australian Red Cross gave a consignment of jeans. (See table 4 for distribution breakdown.) In general, the distributions were conducted via the Medical and Social Welfare Centres of the Ukrainian Red Cross where most of the "clothes banks" are located. Special commissions register the quantity and quality of garments before sorting and distribution. To date, 85-90% of all clothes have been distributed to beneficiaries.

Monitoring has been carried out by the Project Administrator, Finance Co-ordinator and the Federation's Liaison Officer in Kiev. Visits were made to 17 places to check activities and documentation; these visits were often combined with the delivery of relief goods. They helped to speed up reports from remote regions.

Moldova v

In March, the Netherlands Red Cross delegate began a three month mission to supervise distributions, participate in forthcoming projects and act as a resource person for the Moldova Red Cross.

As of the end of April, the WEA Delegate reported distribution of 3,056 bags of **second hand clothes**, with 394 bags left in stock. No figure has yet been given for the number of beneficiaries.

Out of 5,000 **food/hygiene parcels**, purchased through Norwegian Red Cross funding, 4,352 parcels were distributed, while 4,375 food parcels, out of 4,993 parcels supplied by the Netherlands Red Cross, were distributed. Approximately 25,000 people received parcels.

Three **soup kitchens**, functioning since the beginning of April, have supplied 1,306 hot meals. They have been operating in: Chisinàu, Mail Cantina and Bender (Transdnistria region).

The German Red Cross supplied 4,204 food parcels, 6,834 hygiene parcels and 6,840 pairs of winter shoes. Distributions of these, plus nursing kits and basic equipment kits, are to start this month.

Outstanding needs

The large scale of the Winter Emergency Appeal Programme (both in terms of area covered and activities), has resulted in patchy reporting from the National Societies, which have relied more on ad hoc feedback from the regions to the HQs than a specific reporting schedule. It has often been difficult to receive an overall picture of results. In Ukraine, reporting has generally depended on timing of money transfers to the regional committees' accounts. However, in March, acceptable reports were produced for January and February.

Difficulties have been experienced in Belarus: due to the unstable local currency, for example, quantities and contents of the food parcels have often needed adjusting according to fluctuations in pricing.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

A keen media interest in the Programme has been maintained in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, with the Russian media covering the operation at a local rather than national level. Local Red Cross workers have given numerous interviews. The opening of soup kitchens in Moldova was reported on national television.

The Head of Minsk Delegation met the Prime Minister of Moldova and presented a review of the Winter Appeal.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Throughout the four countries, all of which have suffered a tough, prolonged winter, the WEA has been successful in providing significant support to at least a million vulnerable people. While not implemented on the scale originally planned, nor funded to the extent envisaged, the primary objective, to assist those *most vulnerable* to survive the winter, has generally been achieved. Significant side effects have been greater visibility and reinforcement of the local Red Cross committees, as well as the strengthening of partnerships with local authorities.

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Table No. 1
The Belarus Red Cross
Distributions of food parcels,
(January-March)

No.	Belarus Red Cross Committees	Distributions in January	Distributions in February	Distributions in March	TOTAL (I round)	Supply/ Distributions in March (II round)
1	Minsk Municipal Committee	1,147	393		1,540	1,770/-
2	Brest Regional Comm.	1,312	37	162+9 in April	1,520	
3	Vitebsk Regional Comm.	230	873	417	1,520	
4	Gomel Regional Comm.	1,499	0		1,499	43/43
5	Grodno Regional Comm.	1,171	349		1,520	
6	Minsk Regional Comm.	1,437	123		1,560	1,600/858
7	Mogiljov Regional Comm.	0	1,424	93	1,517	
8	Railway Committee	0	523	377	900.00	
9	UNHCR (refugees)	100	0		100	100/100
	Total:	6,896	3,722	1,058	11,676	3,513/1,001

Table No. 2
The Belarus Red Cross
Distributions of Hot Meals
 (January-March)

	Committee	Distributions in January	Distributions in February	Distributions in March
		Number of meals	Number of meals	Number of meals
1	Minsk municipal Committee	960	1,328	1,332
2	Brest Reg. Comm.		218	2,179
3	Vitebsk Reg. Comm.	324	1,149	2,837
4	Gomel Reg. Comm.	2,880	1,440	
5	Grodno Reg. Comm.		1,251	3,129
6	Minsk Reg. Comm.	1,159	854	2,329
7	Mogiljov Reg. Comm.	899	1,965	880
8	Railway Committee		420	3,960
	Total:	6,222	8,625	16,646

Table No. 3
The Ukrainian Red Cross
Distribution of food parcels
 (January - March 1998)

No	Region	First Instalment		Second Instalment		TOTAL
		<i>Reporting Date</i>	<i>Number of parcels</i>	<i>Reporting Date</i>	<i>Number of parcels</i>	
1	Vinnitsa	23.01.98	800		1,300	2,100
2	Volyn	19.01.98	400	20-Feb-98	900	1,300
3	Lugansk	23.01.98	1,090	20-Feb-98	2,000	3,090
4	Dnepropetrovsk	23.01.98	1,250	03-March-98	2,115	3,365
5	Donetsk	23.01.98	1,005	23-Feb-98	1,500	2,505
6	Zhitomir	23.01.98	725	23-Feb-98	1,100	1,825
7	Zakarpattie	23.01.98	429	23-Feb-98	556	985
8	Zaporizhe	19.01.98	800	23-Feb-98	1,000	1,800
9	Ivano-Frankivsk	23.01.98	500	25-Feb-98	1,100	1,600
10	Kirovograd	23.01.98	338	20-Feb-98	1,040	1,378
11	Kiev region	20.01.98	650	03-March-98	1,200	1,850
12	Crimea AR	23.01.98	800	18-Feb-98	800	1,600
13	Lviv	23.01.98	284			284
14	Nikolaev	26.01.98	504	16-March-98	1,000	1,504
15	Odessa	23.01.98	0	19-Feb-98	500	500
16	Poltava	19.01.98	755	05-March-98	2,701	3,456
17	Rivne	26.01.98	500	18-Feb-98	1,000	1,500
18	Sumy		0	03-March-98	800	800
19	Ternopol	19.01.98	500	25-Feb-98	860	1,360
20	Kharkiv	26.01.98	500	16-March-98	1,000	1,500
21	Kherson	19.01.98	394	20-Feb-98	660	1,054
22	Khemlitsky	23.01.98	500	26Feb-98	1,000	1,500
23	Cherkassy	20.01.98	800	25-Feb-98	800	1,600
24	Chernivtsy	20.01.98	800	05-March-98	800	1,600
25	Chernigov	21.01.98	400	26-Feb-98	1,200	1,600
26	Kiev city	20.01.98	1,003	02-March-98	1,240	2,243
27	Sevastopol	10.01.98	275			275
	TOTAL		16,002		28,172	44,174

