

BELARUS, MOLDOVA, RUSSIAN FEDERATION, UKRAINE: WINTER EMERGENCY APPEAL 1997/98

27 January 1999

appeal no. 15/97

situation report no. 5 (final)

period covered: 7 October 1997 - May/June 1998

The distribution of second hand clothes, family food parcels, hot meals, hygiene parcels and seeds to more than a million people across all four countries throughout the coldest winter months has been completed. Late and limited funding (only 47.82 % of the appeal was covered) meant fewer vulnerable people were assisted than originally planned, although the support rendered at a time of socio-economic dislocation and non-payment of wages and pensions undoubtedly helped many through the "silent disaster" of wintertime.

The context

The political-economic transition in the four countries targeted by this appeal has imposed a heavy toll on their populations. Restructuring has brought inflation, swallowing up salaries and savings, while health and social welfare structures have been chronically underfunded, giving rise to huge numbers of people living either on or below the poverty line. Government statistics from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova indicate a combined total of 73 million people in this category. The most vulnerable are those on fixed incomes, such as the elderly and disabled, whose real purchasing power has been reduced. Similarly, families with several children, the unemployed, single parents and low income families, as well as pregnant women and young mothers, are especially hard hit.

The winter period, driving up costs of heating, clothing and transport, tests the ability of the existing support systems to their limit. For the vulnerable groups and those in institutions (orphans, the mentally or physically disabled, prisoners) it means increasing destitution and a further decline in living standards, constituting a silent but spreading disaster.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Belarus •

The Appeal was 55% covered. Local fund-raising was productive: CHF 140,400 (not included in the WEA contributions).

Variations in original objectives were as follows:

diapers, footwear and bed linen: 0% coverage, except for some Swiss Red Cross items;
 second hand clothes (not originally planned for): 55,870 beneficiaries;
 food parcels: 122% coverage; 36,826 distributed instead of 30,000 -- in three rounds;
 hygiene parcels: 0% coverage, though some items were purchased for use in canteens;
 soup kitchens: 70% coverage, operated for five instead of six months, about 45,000 meals served instead of 65,000;
 nursing kits: none, but 400 tonometers and 148,000 syringes purchased for Visiting Nurses instead of five vehicles, two were obtained -- one offered by local authorities, one partially WEA funded;
 office equipment: 2 computers, 1 copier, 1 fax machine and a CD-ROM player.

Moldova •

The Appeal was 72% covered. Although second hand clothes arrived in Kishinev in December, 1997, much of the programme was implemented later (March-August) and consisted of a series of projects, funded by various donors. Certain factors, including the NS's profile, as well as its relationship with the Federation, had an impact on implementation.

clothes and footwear: 135% coverage (27,000 beneficiaries instead of 20,000);
 soup kitchens: 62.5% coverage (15,000 meals instead of 24,000);
 food parcels: 71% coverage (14,200 instead of 20,000);
 hygiene parcels: 83% coverage;
 40 nursing kits delivered;
 basic medicines: 10.25% coverage;
 seeds and tools: none.

Sets provided by the Netherlands Red Cross (valued at CHF 52,500) for Visiting Nurses working in medico social centres were not part of the programme.

Russia •

Both the objectives and plan of action of this operation proved appropriate, although the needs were far greater than the assistance provided. In general, the operation was carried out according to plan, although some modifications were made necessary by lack of funding. CHF 14,090,000 was sought for Russia; CHF 5,659,187.31 was received. Fund-raising in-country was negligible.

- Second-hand clothes coverage was larger than planned: 740,000 beneficiaries instead of 593,500;
- Soup kitchen coverage was larger: 120,000 meals served instead of 115,000;
- Family food parcels coverage was lower : 117,024 beneficiaries instead of 120,000 families;
- There was *no* procurement of new shoes, winter clothes, blankets, bed linen, diapers or anti-parasite shampoo;
- Two mobile communication sets were purchased;
- Fax machines for all nine regions (one per region) were distributed;
- No vehicles were purchased;
- Seeds were given to more than 30,000 beneficiaries.

Ukraine •

Approximately 14 million people were estimated to be in need; some 200,000 received assistance through the WEA operation. Donations amounting to CHF 786,240 were received. The NS raised CHF 477,36000 in in-kind donations and services; 4,440 staff and volunteers were involved in the operation.

612.5 tons of food products were distributed in food parcels to 85,000 households instead of 100,000;
 hot meals were served to 583 beneficiaries (instead of 4,000) in Lviv oblast from February to June;
 second hand clothes were distributed to 92,702 people (against a scheduled 100,000);
 none of the 50,000 hygiene parcels could be purchased;
 1,600 water filters, 15 tons of detergents were distributed;
 8.5 tons of medicines were purchased and most have been distributed

Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine •

Beneficiary selection, based on state statistical data, was checked against Red Cross assessments and rechecked with the local authorities.

Distribution varied according to country and region; if the local Red Cross had the required capacity at village level, it organised distributions, otherwise human resources, transport and storage support came from the social welfare department. In the nine Russian Republics/oblasts covered by the Appeal, 300 centres were set up to implement clothes and food parcel distribution. Red Cross visibility was initially poor, but later improved throughout the programme.

In country purchase of food parcels - in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine - was not only cost-effective, but included advantages such as providing locally produced food, low transport costs, no customs clearance and support for the local economy. Some problems in obtaining the commodities were encountered in Belarus.

In-kind donations (second hand clothes) were the largest part of the programme in Russia. Specific benefits included: enabling children to attend school, some people to obtain jobs and the homeless to survive winter conditions. However, in some countries, and especially in Ukraine, there were complaints about the quality of clothing. More *warm* clothes were needed and government-imposed restrictions on humanitarian aid received (in Russia: not exceeding a CHF 16,000 limit per month per region) caused problems. Customs procedures were troublesome throughout all four countries, and particularly serious in Russia.

Geneva Secretariat support was provided in designing contracts for food parcels, as well as in a number of other areas, not least in initiating and maintaining the interest and support of donors.

The role of the National Societies was crucial in implementing the programme. Despite general under-staffing, and the time constraints imposed by both late funding and late placement of logistics delegates (who arrived in Moscow at the end of November, in Minsk at the end of January) the operation - unprecedented in scale for the region - provided the NSs with valuable experience in handling such large distributions, as well as an opportunity to raise the Red Cross profile among local authorities and beneficiaries alike. It is largely due to strong, energetic and innovative chairpeople that the operation was a success. In Belarus, good relations between the NS and the Federation assisted the implementation. This was not the case in Moldova, where the NS is not yet a member of the Federation. However, a full-time relief team (provided for three months by the Netherlands Red Cross) reinforced the operation. In Ukraine, the NS was responsible for the co-ordination of all WEA operations. In Russia, a small WEA team, consisting of a delegate and two logistics officers (one from the NS, the other from the Federation) was based at the RRC HQs but spent most time in the field. The hiring of three monitors/field officers significantly assisted them.

Communications, although improved by installing fax machines, remained difficult with remote Red Cross branches, resulting in reporting delays. Transfers of money also proved problematic in some areas

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Overall, the experience gained through the operation has strengthened the capacity and image of the four Red Cross Societies. In all cases, the local government authorities/ social welfare departments played a crucial supportive role in corroborating lists of beneficiaries as well as in providing warehousing and transport. The two Russian regions which were least successful in implementing the campaign were those where links with the local authorities were weakest.

International and local media reports generated good publicity, with the exception of the central Russian

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The Winter Emergency Programme 1997/98 proved to be tough and complex to implement for both the Operating National Societies and for the Federation. However, its impact is beyond doubt -- not only for the beneficiaries but also for the Red Cross. The image and capacity of the National Societies have been improved, as have expectations regarding any further action. Experience gained will prove invaluable for implementing any future programme, for which there is a continuing and urgent need, since the socio-economic situation for the most vulnerable has worsened significantly across all four countries.

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