

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: DROUGHT

18 December 1997

appeal no. 17/97

situation report no. 01

period covered: 1 November - 15 December, 1997

The serious drought now affecting most of the country shows little signs of ending and food shortages are growing more acute. The PNG Red Cross/Federation relief operation has got under way, but is being slowed down by delays in deliveries of government food supplies and may have to be redesigned to take this factor into account. If this happens the appeal target will be increased.

The context

Drought conditions started to appear in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in September as one of the consequences of El Nino weather pattern, and worsened throughout the months of October and November. In addition to severe drought and widespread bushfires, a prolonged series of night frosts destroyed cash crops and staple root-vegetable crops.

Besides the dramatic effects on the nutritional and general health status of large sectors of the population, the almost unprecedented drought is adversely affecting the country's economy and infrastructures, including the generation of electricity. The wider social implications of the emergency are alarming: there is the possibility of large-scale population movement from the countryside towards the urban centres that could result in law and order problems, damage to social cohesion and even conflict.

A National Action Plan was drawn up by the government, which pledged PGK 20 million for the procurement and distribution of food commodities. The Federation launched an Emergency Appeal seeking CHF 570,000 to assist, through the PNG Red Cross, 160,000 beneficiaries by way of direct relief (water) and relief/rehabilitation (family packs). In addition, three experienced delegates have been put at the disposal of the provincial authorities to provide technical advice, in conjunction with the PNG Red Cross, on the planning and implementation of the food distributions.

Latest events

A new assessment of the drought has recently been conducted by Australia's overseas aid agency, AusAid, on behalf of the PNG government. While the full report has yet to be released, it is now commonly accepted that the number of people at severe risk of starvation or disease has risen to over 650,000, and there is strong anecdotal evidence of deaths among the most vulnerable.

Although it has rained in some areas, the drought is far from over. Even in the unlikely event of prolonged, soaking rain, the first crops are not expected to be ready before April 1998. But, since most seeds in the Highlands have been consumed as food, large quantities of new seed will be required for planting. If no significant precipitation occurs soon and the next crop fails, the country will face a six-month dry season (May to October) when food aid needs may assume gigantic proportions.

Grave concerns have been expressed about the delays in the implementation of the government's action plan. The current political turmoil and various constraints, such as the lack of clear mechanisms for the release of funds and difficult communications between the provincial administrations and the central level, have made the procurement and distribution of food disappointingly slow.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The PNG Red Cross Secretary General, who was appointed NGO co-ordinator for the Provincial Facilitators Programme by the government and is a member of the National Working Group for Drought Relief, has been very active in promoting co-ordination and information flow.

The PNG Red Cross branch on Manus island, with the support of the Federation, has started the distribution of water containers to vulnerable communities. Meanwhile, the first family packs have been distributed to 200 families who lost their houses in bushfires.

Field Delegates, dispatched to the provinces of Milne Bay, Oro, Gulf and Morobe, have taken up their technical adviser role to Provincial Disaster Managers and to local Red Cross branches. According to the delegates' reports, expertise needs vary widely from place to place. Logistics, relief distributions, reporting, monitoring and basic financial management are the issues upon which the Federation delegates are consulted most.

Local Red Cross officials are working closely with the Federation delegates to identify further needs and design a series of "mini projects" to support the rehabilitation efforts of the communities.

Outstanding needs

A large part of the Red Cross response to this emergency is dependent on the efficient and timely delivery of food supplies from the central government to the provincial districts. Because of the concerns regarding the authorities' response referred to above and the increasing severity of the situation, the Federation PNG Delegation and the PNG Red Cross will shortly be reviewing their plan of action and looking at a more direct Red Cross involvement in the relief efforts. This may require an upward revision of the appeal target, currently almost 90 per cent covered.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Close contact is maintained with the National Disaster and Emergency Service and with other governmental agencies. Donors, UN agencies and NGOs are regularly consulted during working groups and bilateral meetings to ensure proper co-ordination of the operations.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The worst drought to affect PNG in more than fifty years is showing only slight signs of breaking. Generous support from donors is ensuring that the Red Cross is in the forefront of assistance to thousands among the most vulnerable.

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