INDONESIA: HAZE/SMOG

15 May 1998

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period covered: 1 February 1998 to 1 May 1998

Drought is affecting parts of Indonesia, increasing the risk of a return of the haze/smog that choked much of south east Asia last year until the monsoon in November. The Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia) is continuing its health education campaign, providing training and distributing leaflets and posters on preventive measures for the rural population in affected areas. The current security situation in the country may mean the limited diversion of some capacity away from this programme.

The context

The haze/smog that choked much of south east Asia cleared with the belated arrival of the 1997 monsoon, but widespread drought in parts of Indonesia is now increasing the risk of a repeat of the phenomenon.

The Federation appeal for CHF 265,000 launched 3 November 1997 sought to assist the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia - PMI) in carrying out a health education campaign for the general population. The campaign aims to advise affected families on longer term care for persons with respiratory ailments; monitor the health and food situation in affected communities; and provide early warning in the next dry season. Its overall objective is to safeguard the health of vulnerable groups during times of drought and forest fires by mobilising and training local PMI staff and volunteers to work with the affected population.

Latest events

Whilst the current security situation in Indonesia is expected to effect the operation, every effort will be made to implement the activities as planned.

Although the smoke haze cleared up over south east Asia with the onset of the Northeast monsoon last November, the relief the rains brought to Sumatra and Kalimantan in Indonesia did not last long. Due to the El Nino weather phenomenon the monsoon season was very short and irregular, bringing only a fraction of the water needed in areas affected by forest fires, where it failed to extinguish fires in the peat layer. The ensuing drought has caused failed harvests and food scarcities.

In February and March satellite photos showed up to 800 "hot spots", representing underground fires. After three dry months, the last week of April brought some rain to Kalimantan. Although the rain was not sufficient to extinguish all the fires or the ongoing peat fires, as of 3 May the number of detectable "hot spots" had been reduced to 60.

The Indonesian government has given fire fighting the highest priority in terms of manpower and material: at present more than 3,000 fire-fighters supported by water bomber planes are deployed in East Kalimantan.

Since the dry season normally lasts from May to October, there may well be a renewed outbreak of fires. In East Kalimantan more than 180,000 hectares have burned this year and around 20,000 hectares are currently affected by fires. The economic impact alone, in terms of lost revenue, is estimated at over USD 3,000,000,000.

The fires have caused renewed haze/smog problems. Airports have been closed and traffic hampered. The numbers affected by respiratory related diseases are rising. The shortage of ground water, brought on by the drought, has forced the population to use surface water, which is polluted by haze dust particles.

ASEAN environment Ministers met in Malaysia in February and in Brunei on 4 April to discuss the implementation of a common haze action plan, based on the realisation that unless the forest fires are brought under control in Kalimantan, they may create haze conditions similar to 1997, with a severe impact on the region and population centres in Malaysia and Singapore.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Because of the risk of a repetition of the 1997 haze conditions, the PMI, despite many other priorities in the troubled country, has moved ahead in implementing its Plan of Action according to the appeal.

Training of trainers
The programme relies on a multiplier approach. Staff and volunteers from Chapters and Branches in affected areas have been trained as trainers in six courses given by PMI Headquarters Training Division. These trainers will in turn train Branch volunteers, who will train/inform village cadres.

The Training of Trainers has now been completed. Since the previous Sitrep, the last four courses were held, in East Kalimantan, West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan and South Sumatra, training a total of 133 trainers. In associated one day meetings, 100 board members were briefed on the programme and their monitoring and supervision duties.

Branches
To date, 38 of 58 Branches have submitted an individual Plan of Action, which includes a Branch budget and a timetable for implementation. Branches have trained 828 branch volunteers and trained/informed 960 village cadres.

Health Education materials
The training curriculum proved to be flexible enough to incorporate extra information: in view of an outbreak of dengue fever in April, a lecture on preventive measures was added.

All mini-posters (146,000), leaflets (109,500) and posters (10,000) have been distributed to the branches involved in this programme. Through simple text and drawings they present information for household level prevention measures and environmental protection. They have been very well received and can be seen everywhere.

Achievements
The programme is very well accepted by the rural population.

Every training of trainers course started with a one day meeting for Chapter and Branch Board members, at which not only the haze programme but also other programmes and structural issues were discussed.

Dissemination of the Red Cross Principles and information about PMI and its programmes is an essential part of the programme. Reporting from Branches has improved and several Branches have seen an increase in the number of volunteers.

Apart from haze information, the programme includes an early warning element, which should help the population in coping with future emergencies, and simple preventive health measures: safe water, dengue fever precautions and garbage disposal. As a side effect, it has given PMI far better first hand knowledge about the health situation among the rural population in all affected areas.

Constraints
Although improvements have taken place, the performance of some Branches is inadequate. PMI NHQ is addressing this issue and further progress is expected in the course of the programme.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

PMI is working closely with the relevant Indonesian Government departments, especially the Department of Health, the Education Department and Environmental NGO. Co-ordination and support from local Provincial Governments have been essential to efforts to reach as many of the rural population in the affected areas as possible.

Media
Media coverage of the programme is extremely limited. An Information Delegate from the Federation's Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur has arrived in Indonesia to help boost media interest. A documentary video is also planned, for broadcasting over a local TV channel.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details. Thanks to generous support from the Australian government (AusAid) through the Australian Red Cross and cash contributions from the German and Japanese Red Cross Societies, this appeal has been fully covered.

Conclusion

Although air conditions have improved and the haze and smog are now very localised, there is still a major risk that the fires in Kalimantan may flare up to 1997 levels. Hence this programme remains very relevant.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Fundraising and Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department