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INDONESIA: HAZE/SMOG

14 July 1998

appeal no. 18/97

situation report no. 4

period covered: 1 May to 1 July 1998

The haze/smog that choked much of Southeast Asia cleared with the belated arrival of the 1997 monsoon, but widespread drought and ongoing fires in parts of Indonesia increased the risk of a repeat of the phenomenon in 1998. Given that the haze and smog phenomena is likely to be a reoccurring one, that the drought is now well established, that environmental degradation is expected to worsen and that the overall economic situation in Indonesia is placing further strain on the government's ability to provide statutory services (such as health), the timely intervention of PMI is an increasingly crucial element in helping to ensure the well-being of the most vulnerable population.

The context

The Federation appeal for CHF 265,000 launched 3 November 1997 sought to assist the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia or PMI) in carrying out a health education campaign for the general population in the affected areas. The Appeal's overall objective was to safeguard the health of vulnerable groups during times of drought and forest fires.

The campaign aimed to advise affected families on longer term care for persons with respiratory ailments, monitor the health and food situation in affected communities and to provide early warning in the next dry season. The campaign depended on mobilising and training local PMI staff and volunteers to work at the community level.

Latest events

During May 1998, Indonesia, as a result of the serious economic and political crisis, experienced the worst social unrest in more than 30 years. The unrest sparked riots across Indonesia and led to a change in the presidency and the installation of a transitional government. With little sign of economic improvement, where inflation is expected to reach 80% , the economy is forecast to contract by a further 10% (Foreign Report on IMF, Janes Information Group, London, July 1998) and unemployment is expected to increase to 10.7m (OCHA Report, Geneva, May 1998), the situation in the country remains difficult from a social, economic and political perspective.

Due to unexpected rainfall in April and May most forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan were extinguished. However, an estimated 30 fires in inaccessible areas are still burning and satellite images show a number of "hot spots" deep down in the peat layer. UN experts have warned of a serious risk that the forest fires will flare up again and send haze and smoke across the region. Overall an estimated

200,000 hectares of primary rain-forest and plantation have been burned; this has led to hazardous health conditions, loss of livelihoods (timber trade revenue lost USD 2.3b in East Kalimantan) and widespread environmental damage, including threats to the already endangered Orangutan.

Meanwhile, whilst the ASEAN countries continue to discuss the creation of a fund in order to fight the fires, a report by FAO and WFP “conservatively estimates that 7.5 million people of the more than 19.5 million people living in the 53 districts of 15 provinces will likely experience acute household food insecurity as a result of the 1997 drought and deterioration of the economy” (OCHA/GVA- 98/0197, March 1998). In April WFP appealed for USD 88m to avert a serious food crisis.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The events during May, when PMI deployed staff and ambulances on the streets of Jakarta, caused only a limited delay to the haze operation which is due to end in September. It entered its final stages as training and dissemination were taken to the community level. The following is a brief update of activities:

Training of Senior Trainers

Completed during May. All senior trainers have been trained.

Plan of Action from Branches

All 58 branches involved in this programme have submitted their individual Plans of Action, including a branch budget and a timetable for final implementation.

Health Education materials

The educational materials, which were specifically developed for this programme, continue to be distributed to PMI branches, government departments and to the community.

Training of volunteers

The operation, through the senior trainers, planned to train 60 volunteers at each branch (58 x 60). Currently a total of 2,268 volunteers have been trained with final training sessions planned in early July.

Training at community level

The trained volunteers, tasked with training/dissemination of the programme to rural village cadres, have now reached 1,800 village cadres. In turn an estimated 354,000 people (out of a target of two million people) have directly benefited from the operation. Training and dissemination will continue until the target communities have all been reached.

Actual Impact on the Community

Whilst there is little doubt about the content and scale of the above activities, there remains little empirical data on the actual impact of the programme. Whilst this is due to both the remoteness and scale of the programme as well as to the lack of good monitoring plans, it is proposed that an evaluation (involving the Federation Regional Delegation) be carried out to look at the following points:

- **changes of behaviour:** are people, for instance, taking steps to improve garbage disposal and better manage water sources?
- **respiratory conditions:** are there trends that suggest a difference between areas targeted by this operation and those that were not?
- **food supply:** government and international organisations (WFP etc.) are forecasting further shortages, is this the case in the area of operation?
- **early warning:** what systems are in place as a result of the operation?

Outstanding needs.

Whilst this programme is fully supported, given that this phenomenon is not a passing one, it is likely that following the evaluation, further activities addressing the health (e.g. water and sanitation) and environmental impact may be implemented. This will depend on the need, the findings of the evaluation and on the overall plans of the Indonesian Government and International bodies.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

PMI, as an auxiliary to the government, is working closely with all relevant local government authorities (Department of Health, Department of Education, Department of Environmental Protection). The co-ordination with, and support of, the local government authorities has been essential for the implementation of this programme.

The Federation and PMI (as one of the few indigenous organisations involved) have also co-ordinated with the UN. Programme information has been shared at the country level and the Secretariat Desk Officer has participated in OCHA and UNEP meetings in Geneva. Whilst there remains considerable focus on 'high-tech' solutions (such as water bombing etc.), the UN have praised the efforts of PMI (specifically mentioning Australian RC support) in working at the community level.

Media coverage has so far still been limited to local newspapers. However, a film crew from the national television is currently filming PMI activities in order to produce video coverage of the overall programme. The PMI public relations officer is working on this activity.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Whilst lacking empirical data, there is no doubt that this operation has enhanced the rural communities ability to cope with the current disaster. Furthermore, the provision of health education and focus on practical ways of coping with, and preparing for, drought and fire related hazards, has complimented the more 'high tech' activities of the government and UN agencies. The operation, though not yet over, has raised the National Society's awareness of environmental hazards, has helped it identify some of its strengths and weaknesses and has given the branches a higher profile at all levels.

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