

BANGLADESH: COLD WAVE

25 June 1998

appeal no. 2/98

situation report No. 1 (final report)

period covered: January - May 1998

The distribution of 26,175 blankets to victims of the cold wave experienced by Bangladesh from December 1997 to February 1998, has been completed. The operation covered 64 districts and was carried out by local BDRCS units.

The context

Bangladesh suffered its coldest weather for five years from December 1997 to February 1998, when temperatures fell to as low as 6.2 degrees Celsius. The cold weather disrupted daily life and economic activities and was made worse by thick fog that brought road and river traffic to a standstill.

Since Bangladesh is used to temperatures of over 20 degrees Celsius at the period of the year when the cold spell occurred, the majority of people were caught unprepared. Poor and homeless people with young children and the elderly suffered the most, and some 120 people are reported to have died of cold.

With the advent of spring in late February, temperatures returned to normal.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

After launching an appeal for 34,000 blankets on 9 January, the International Federation procured and air-lifted 4,018 blankets from India on 18 January, while at the same time making a local purchase of 6,000 second-hand blankets. The German Red Cross flew in a donation of 17,000 blankets on 18 January. The UNHCR in Bangladesh provided a further 1,200 blankets. Thus, in response to the appeal, the BDRCS received a total of 28,218 blankets.

Keeping 2,043 blankets in reserve, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) went ahead with a Plan of Action it had drawn up to distribute 26,175 blankets to the most vulnerable people in 64 districts through 68 BDRCS Units. The blankets were to be delivered to the Units during the third week of January and distribution was to be completed by the Units as soon as possible thereafter.

The Districts/City Units were assigned to one of three categories, A, B, or C, depending on the severity of exposure to cold weather. Thirty-five Units in Category A (the most severely affected) were allocated 465 blankets each, while 29 Units in category B received an allocation of 300 blankets each. In Category C, 4 Units were allotted a total of 1,200 blankets (those provided by the UNHCR).

The blankets for Category A Units were dispatched to the Units between 20 and 28 January. Category B Units received their blankets between 8 and 19 February. These blankets were sent by BDRCS trucks from the BDRCS Warehouse in Dhaka. The 1,200 blankets for the C Units were delivered by BDRCS trucks from the BDRCS warehouse in Cox's Bazar in mid-January.

Beneficiaries were selected by office bearers, volunteers, youth members and BDRCS officers on the basis of door-to-door surveys conducted in accordance with the guidelines in the BDRCS Disaster Field Manual. They comprised elderly men and women without family support, widows and divorced women with young children, and the handicapped.

Muster-rolls were prepared after the beneficiaries were selected. Distribution points in most cases were sited close to beneficiaries' dwelling places. Each beneficiary was given one blanket and put a thumbprint against his/her name by way of receipt.

Distributions took place in the presence of members of the Unit Executive Committee, BDRCS Unit level officers, local elites, volunteers and Red Crescent youth members. Red Crescent flags and banners were displayed at all distribution sites. Volunteers and Youth members wore large BDRCS identifying plastrons. In some places, banners indicated that the blankets were donated by the German Red Cross and/or the Federation. In some cases a Federation Delegate or a local officer employed by the Federation Delegation witnessed the distribution. In addition, the officers assigned by the BDRCS NHQ monitored the whole process.

Reports were received by the BDRCS NHQ from all units announcing the completion of local distributions.

It should be mentioned that a number of Units took the initiative of procuring locally and distributing some blankets and second-hand clothes before the Appeal blankets arrived.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The relief operation supplemented similar operations undertaken by the Bangladesh Government and various NGOs.

The electronic and print media at both national and local levels publicised and commented favourably on the Red Crescent relief action -- coverage that has helped to enhance the image of the BDRCS.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The experience of this cold wave, the misery it brought to the vulnerable population and BDRCS's lack of readily available blankets and winter clothing, have taught a valuable lesson. In order to deal with a similar situation or other emergencies effectively in future, the BDRCS needs to maintain a reasonable quantity of buffer stock blankets and winter clothing.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding & Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department