

CHINA: EARTHQUAKE IN HEBEI PROVINCE

16 January 1998

appeal no. 3/98

situation report no. 1

period covered: 13 - 16 January 1998

Severe winter weather is hampering relief efforts in Northern Hebei. Makeshift shelters are being improvised from rubble to counteract temperatures of minus 27°C. Cash contributions are urgently needed to allow the Chinese Red Cross/Federation, which have exceptional access to the disaster site, continue their vital work.

The context

A earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale struck northern Hebei Province at 1150 local time on Saturday 10 January. Information provided by the Red Cross Society of China (R CSC), available on its homepage (www.chineseredcross.org.cn) reveals :

- { 44,000 people homeless;
- { 140,000 rooms collapsed;
- { 284,000 houses seriously damaged;
- { more than 470,000 people in 1,824 villages across 37 townships significantly affected; 240,000 in 696 villages seriously so.

Latest events

The disaster has been compounded by a severe winter storm. Snow began to fall on 14 January, temperatures have plummeted to minus 27° Centigrade (-2° Fahrenheit) and more heavy snow is forecast. A Secretariat Senior Relief Officer, who arrived in the area on 15 January reports that villagers, provincial worker, and the military are working rapidly to move the vulnerable into makeshift shelters from tents that would not be able to withstand the weight of the snow. Using rubble from collapsed houses, small, low-roofed huts are being constructed, lined with straw, mats and quilts to help counteract the freezing weather.

The Federation Officer also reported that it took seven hours to travel the 70 kilometres to the disaster area, due to a combination of mountain roads and bad weather. Trucks carrying relief supplies were having serious difficulty negotiating the icy roads.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

RCSC medical, relief and first aid teams, working in dangerous and uncomfortable conditions are assisting the injured and providing, food and warm clothing, while provincial and local branches

continue to raise funds and ship relief goods. National Societies around the world have undertaken fund-raising campaigns.

Plan of Action •

Following the launch of the preliminary appeal on 13 January, a Federation/RCSC assessment team was granted exceptional access to the disaster area by the government and gathered extensive data. A Plan of Action is being prepared and will be submitted to National Societies early next week.

The assessment team has learned that the last harvest in the area was very poor and many local people had only marginal food stocks when the disaster struck. Although the exact amount of rice required is yet to be determined, RCSC has concluded that this will be one of the commodities required to help the most vulnerable survive the winter.

RCSC community posts are also needed to provide basic health care, monitor needs, and to act as distribution points. First Aid Stations must also be constructed and outfitted --- these actions will form the main part of the emergency rehabilitation phase.

Information •

A Federation Media Service Officer has delivered video material to Reuters in Beijing and photographs are being sent electronically to the Secretariat for posting on the "Direct From The Field" Web page. The can be downloaded by National Societies for use in their publications.

The RCSC just completed translation of the Federation Network brochure into Mandarin and they had just been printed when this disaster struck. Copies were distributed to local branches and community leaders in Hebei Province.

Outstanding needs

Cash is urgently needed and it is requested that pledges made be sent as quickly as possible to keep the operation running to capacity.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Several ministries of the Chinese Government were active in the disaster area shortly after the earthquake hit. Military personnel, attending a training course at a nearby base, were quickly sent to the scene to assist with search and rescue and to provide emergency aid. The RCSC has closely co-ordinated its effort in Beijing, at provincial and at local level.

No other international organisation has been granted access to the area. As in natural disasters anywhere, access during the initial emergency period is limited to reduce the potential for chaos.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

This earthquake struck in an area which was already vulnerable due to a poor harvest. Severe winter weather has greatly affected operations and required adaptation of relief plans to meet the changing situation. Through its vast network, thousands of RCSC staff and volunteers have been involved in fund-raising in their communities and otherwise participating in the relief effort. Continued support from National Societies around the world will ensure that the Society has the resources it needs to assist its beneficiaries in Hebei Province.

For further information contact Kris Hurlburt, Desk Officer for China on ++4122 7304269 or e-mail hurlburt@ifrc.org.

Ann Naef
Acting Head
Appeals & Reports Service

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department