

BANGLADESH: FLOODS

17 August 1998

appeal no. 23/98

situation report no. 1

period covered: 31 July - 9 August

Severe flooding along the main river systems of Bangladesh shows little sign of abating and more rains are expected. Bangladesh Red Crescent Branches, many of which started relief operations using local resources are now distributing the first round of rations under the Federation financed operation: 240 tons of foodstuffs, representing two weeks supplies, is being given to 20,000 families, or 100,000 persons.

The context

Bangladesh is in the grip of the severest floods since 1988. The onset of the monsoon in June triggered flash floods in the north and in July torrential rains brought further floods in south-eastern districts, causing widespread damage. The situation worsened from mid-July onwards as continuous rainfall in the great river catchment areas outside Bangladesh led to sharp rises in the water levels in most of the rivers flowing into the Jamuna (Brahmaputra), Meghna, and Padma (Ganges) basins. Crop lands, human habitats, roads and even railway lines were inundated in district after district. Millions have been rendered homeless. Low lying areas of Dhaka are under water and scores of villages along river banks have been engulfed by the floods. Additional rain will further aggravate the situation throughout the country.

When the Federation's Appeal was launched, over 15 million people in 37 of the country's 64 districts were affected. The Prime Minister has announced that repayment of agricultural loans by farmers will be postponed for one year. The displaced, mostly poor people, are falling prey to disease and are short of money to buy food, as work becomes scarce and prices increase.

Latest events

Official updates on 9 August put the total flood-related deaths at 270, of which 30 were in Dhaka district. Floodwaters remain static in five districts, but most of the Meghna basin rivers are still rising. The latest government report claims 59,080 persons have been affected by waterborne diseases.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The deteriorating flood situation is being closely monitored by the BDRCS and the Federation. Joint teams have visited affected areas and contacts are being maintained with the relevant authorities and other agencies.

The Federation International Appeal was launched on 30 July based on an action plan to provide two weeks food ration in two phases to 100,000 of the most vulnerable families and medical teams serving an estimated 250,000 people.

BDRCS has nearly completed the distribution of the first two weeks rations -- 200 MT of compressed rice and 40 MT of molasses, procured by the Federation with CHF 200,000 from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF). The rations are being given to 20,000 of the most vulnerable families, or 100,000 people.

During the distributions efforts are being made to disseminate the principles and mandate of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. Improved disaster preparedness in the affected districts -- one of the objectives of the Appeal plan of action -- will follow when the situation permits.

The BDRCS has asked all its district Branches to keep the NHQ informed about the flood situation, to carry out relief needs assessments, to mobilise their volunteers and to carry out additional emergency relief operations from their own resources. BDRCS has also appealed for support from the general public on national television.

Branches in Gaibandha, Serajganj, Kurigram, Pabna, Jamalpur, and Chittagong districts and the Dhaka and Rajshahi city Branches have carried out relief operations on their own, distributing water purification tablets, clothes, oral rehydration salts, medicines, and over 40 MT of compressed rice and 8 MT of molasses. Red Crescent volunteers are helping to evacuate marooned families and distribute relief.

Outstanding needs

The overall flood situation shows no sign of improving, and the outstanding needs remain virtually unchanged. Some of them are now being addressed by the Red Crescent/Federation programmes. Where the flood waters are receding, people are returning to their houses which are in urgent need of repair. To prevent water borne diseases and outbreaks of epidemics, unserviceable tubewells and latrines need replacing, supplies of ORS and other medicines must be made available and primary health care services be provided. With large areas still under water there is little scope for alternative income earning activities, leaving the most vulnerable of the affected population in dire need of food rations.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The National Society and the Federation have attended regular meetings of the donor and operational agencies and exchanged information and views with them. The regional Information delegate from the Kuala Lumpur Regional Delegation assisted in the launching of the Appeal, securing wide coverage in foreign and local media. BDRCS activities relating to the floods are featured in the national press and the national television channel has screened Red Crescent messages. Copies of the Appeal and the press release on it have been shared with embassy /mission heads.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Forecasts indicate the flood situation will continue until the beginning of September. The BDRCS plan of action has begun providing assistance to the most vulnerable flood victims, complementing the efforts of others. Initial response to the Appeal has been encouraging but if the operation is to reach its full total of 500,000 beneficiaries, and its operational deadlines, further support must be made available as rapidly as possible.

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