

NEPAL : BHUTANESE REFUGEES

21 September
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appeal no. 01.31/98

situation report no. 1

period covered: 1 January - 31 August 1998

Appeal No. 01.31/98 seeks funding for refugee relief and capacity building. This sitrep addresses developments in the relief programme for refugees. Since 1992, when the first Bhutanese refugees arrived in Nepal, the Nepal Red Cross has provided vital services for a refugee population that grew steadily from 86,000 to over 94,000 in 1998. Over the years, as other organisations scaled down or discontinued their assistance, NRCS stepped into the breach. Today, the National Society is the sole distributor of food and non-food items, and maintains a range of health and community services.

However, because of decreasing financial support, the decision has been taken to end this operation by December 1998. This Report reviews the Nepal Red Cross achievements and details the outstanding needs if this operation is to close in a proper and organised manner.

The context

When, in 1991, the Bhutanese Government imposed severe measures on ethnic Nepalese living in Bhutan, including eviction, a few hundred left, crossed West Bengal and arrived in south-east Nepal with little or no possessions. The Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) was the first organisation to assist them. As more refugees arrived in the following weeks and months, additional organisations took over specific needs, such as shelter, infrastructure, health services, schooling, and later skill development and training.

In late 1992, when the refugee population had grown to about 86,000, UNHCR took on NRCS as its partner in the implementation of a major relief operation. The refugees were scattered in 8 camps in the south-eastern tip of Nepal, close to the border with India. In November 1992, the NRCS appealed to the International Federation for assistance, including non-food items such as blankets, kitchen utensils, stoves, clothes, and the provision of essential ambulance and referral services. This led to the first of several international Federation appeals.

By early 1993, NRCS had established itself as a competent and reliable partner who addressed vital needs of the refugees. With Federation support, it distributed, on a regular basis, the non-food items listed above. As partner of UNHCR, it took over the entire monthly food distribution when, in 1995, Lutheran World Federation (LWF) reduced its activities. NRCS also started the systematic training of refugees in fire-fighting techniques and in tree-planting campaigns, both prominent issues in the crowded camps.

Since 1993 until this year, the Federation, in collaboration with NRCS and with support from participating Societies and the EU/ECHO, has provided approximately 38% of all non-food items. Each registered refugee received one set of clothes, mosquito nets and water containers, and each refugee family was given one blanket per year. In addition, free ambulance services as well as fire fighting equipment were provided.

As other organisations reduced their involvement, NRCS took on additional responsibilities. When LWF reduced its support, it handed over to NRCS an entire warehousing system which the Society has kept fully functioning to this day. NRCS has also used the warehouses to train its staff and improve the overall training and performance of local employees involved in logistics.

In 1995, when NRCS took over the entire food distribution and the distribution of kerosene, in addition to its traditional non-food provision, Red Cross became the second largest donor after the UN (UNHCR and WFP).

Although Bhutan and Nepal have held high level ministerial talks about the refugee problem in the past seven years, no progress whatsoever has been made. With little hope of a reasonable solution in the immediate future, the operation has gradually changed into a long-term social maintenance programme, causing a falling off in funding for agencies involved. This stalemate drove some of the refugees to take their future into their own hands by attempting a series of peace marches and self repatriation in 1997. These efforts were met with mass arrests and imprisonment by Indian authorities but failed to make any effect on the international community and have since died down.

The Red Cross has continued to provide essential support and services for as long as possible. With the mounting deficit in this operation and with insufficient financial support, it has been decided to close the operation by December 1998. This decision has been notified to the UNHCR offices in Kathmandu and Damak (Field Office) and has been discussed in detail during this year's planning meeting for 1999. The decision has also been explained to the Government of Nepal, Home Ministry, the penultimate co-ordinator of this operation. (No other agency currently working in the camps has the capacity to provide cost-effective non-food items and services. Most face the same funding predicament and are continuing operations on a much reduced scale).

Despite this decision, the Federation is committed to helping NRCS phase out this operation in a proper manner, particularly with respect to obligations to local staff, the retention of locally gained expertise, and the future of hundreds of local women who were provided with gainful employment through seven years of clothes production.

In addition, there is a considerable financial obligation, since the annual planning cycle foresaw the regular purchase of blankets and clothing material earlier this year. This material has been procured by NRCS and supplied to the camps for the production and distribution of clothing. Suppliers rightly expect the settlement of their invoices and it is vital to support NRCS in meeting these obligations. The National Society's operational and managerial development over the past few years has been such that, earlier this year, the Federation Delegation in Kathmandu was phased out. It is essential to maintain this positive image and the high level of operational capacity through a final effort to raise sufficient funds that safeguard a dignified and organised exit from this long-term operation.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

At present, there are 94,762 refugees (15,025 families) living in eight camps. Approximately 22% are female adults, 23% male adults, and 55% are children under the age of 18 years. While in the early years of the operation the natural population increase was as high as 360-400 per month, family planning measures introduced during 1995/1996 have taken hold and the monthly population increase has been reduced to an average of 160. This, however, still constitutes a natural increase of the population by an estimated 1,800 - 2,000 a year.

Assistance is only provided to those living in the designated refugee camps. The emphasis of refugee assistance in 1998 was on maintenance and repair of the camp infrastructure and on the provision of essential services. Refugees are, as much as possible, involved in the assistance programmes. In 1997 and 1998, they became increasingly involved in the day-to-day running of the camp and the maintenance of camp facilities and services. To the extent possible, suitably qualified and experienced professionals are employed on a volunteer basis (doctors, nurses, teachers, health workers, technicians, construction workers).

Non-food and food distributions

The distribution carried out in July 1998 (the latest) is representative of NRCS's track record and is virtually identical to the other months. Blankets and clothing are distributed only once and mainly before the cold season. The production of clothing for 1998 is currently under way. The finished items will be distributed within the coming 3 months before the end of the operation.

	Item	Distributed July 1998	Accumulative Total for 1998
*	Shirts (male)	0	0
*	Pants (male)	0	0
*	Bhoto (baby)	0	7,794
*	Suruwal (baby)	0	7,794
*	Kameez (male)	0	4,934
*	Suruwal (male)	0	4,934
*	Kurtha (female)	6,271	10,425
*	Suruwal (female)	6,271	10,425
*	Sarees	0	0
*	Blouse	0	0
	Frocks	999	7,050
*	Petticoats	0	0
	TOTAL Clothing	13,541	53,356
	Mosquito Nets	0	0
*	Blankets	0	0
#	Kerosene (litres)	341,303	2,051,983
#	Washing Soap (pcs)	51,473	241,586
#	Bathing Soap (pcs)	40,659	109,476
#	Stove Wicks	0	19,595
#	Potatoes (kg)	58,447	731,609
#	Pumpkin/Banana/Cabbage (kg)	83,023	700,532
#	Onion (kg)	13,937	95,177
#	Chilli (kg)	4,180	46,372
#	Turmeric (kg)	1,440	22,439
#	Garlic (kg)	0	44,030

** more items will be distributed before the cold season during the remaining months of 1998
items provided by UNHCR but distributed by NRCS.*

Fire-fighting

Refugees have been trained as effective fire-fighters and have, on several occasions, prevented catastrophic fire not only within the camps but also in neighbouring Nepalese settlements and villages.

Stove repair

As a cost reduction measure, a stove "cannibalisation" programme was established in 1995: this took back stoves for repair and salvaged spare parts for the repair programme. This has systematically reduced the costs of providing stoves and has instilled a sense of maintenance in the refugees. Since the beginning of the programme, 14,065 stoves have been repaired and redistributed.

Clothing

Cloth material is purchased and, with the help of hundreds of locally employed women from the host community, the required amount of annual clothing is produced. This involvement of the host population has significantly reduced earlier tension and provides a modest income for women living in a traditionally disadvantaged area of Nepal.

Ambulance service

The NRCS ambulance service provided transport for 325 refugees and 10 local people during July 1998. This brings the annual accumulative total to 1,920 refugees and 146 local patients.

Reforestation

To reduce environmental damage (caused largely by firewood collection and overgrazing) as much as possible, NRCS has planted a total of 25,000 trees during 1997 in and around the various refugee camps.

NRCS management capacity

During the duration of the operation, the Federation carefully monitored the steady increase of NRCS's operational capacity and progressively handed over operational responsibility to NS staff. Since 1995 the National Society has conducted the entire operation on its own with occasional professional and technical input from the Delegation staff.

Outstanding needs

Approximately CHF 520,000 is needed to cover all anticipated expenses until December 1998. This amount includes the settlement of the last purchases made earlier this year of goods that were delivered in the past few weeks, and funds to pay local staff until the end of the operation and to cover obligations, such as layoff / severance payments. A contributions list for 1998 is attached.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

UNHCR acts as co-ordinator of the operation in close consultation with the Government of Nepal, Home Ministry. WFP provides all food items.

LWS is responsible for the construction and maintenance of the refugee accommodation. Save the Children (UK) provides all preventive and curative medical care. OXFAM is responsible for non-formal education and supplementary income generation programmes. CARITAS continues its support to primary and secondary schools in the camps using refugee teachers. Other smaller

organisations in the camp include CVICT, INHURED, HURON, INSEC, AMDA, etc, many of them with a focus on human rights, torture, environment and development.

ICRC supports NRCS through regular three-monthly visit to the camps and organises a tracing and postal service.

Regular Inter-Agency Meetings ensure the highest possible level of co-operation and co-ordination.

Conclusion

Over the years, the Bhutanese Refugee Operation has won international acclaim from many quarters for its professionalism, efficiency, effectiveness, and operational capacity. A sizeable share of this credit must go to the Nepal Red Cross. Through this operation, the National Society has not only served the needy refugee population for over seven years, but has also gained valuable operational experience that will benefit many of the other programmes the National Society undertakes nation wide.

Nevertheless, despite the achievements, sufficient funding can no longer be generated and a considerable deficit has developed. Early in 1998 the Nepal Red Cross prepared a plan for down sizing, in anticipation of funding problems. Officials of the Society and the Federation's South Asia Regional Delegation have met with UNHCR and government officials in preparation for the cessation of Federation support. UNHCR may be able to absorb some of the local staff and programmes in 1999. But, the long-term welfare of the beneficiaries depends upon a solution that can only be brought about by the governments of Nepal and Bhutan.

Since assistance to the refugees began in 1992, the Federation has contributed CHF 4,681,536 . Now only CHF 520,000 is required to close the operation. This will cover the current deficit of CHF 336,000 and provide adequate funds based upon the budget requirements of the NRCS to close this programme. Participating National Societies are urged to explore every funding avenue in order to contribute one last time to this programme . A significant effort by all should generate sufficient support to allow the Nepal Red Cross to end this highly successful operation with the dignity and operational efficiency that both the beneficiaries and the National Society deserve .

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