

TAIPEI: EARTHQUAKE

4 October 1999

***Reference no. 25/99
situation report no. 3
period covered: 29 September - 4 October 1999***

Urgently needed relief supplies continued to arrive in the earthquake affected areas and have been distributed by Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation staff and volunteers. Poor weather conditions, especially typhoons in the region, have underlined the need for more adequate shelter as thousands of people remain accommodated in tents.

The context

It has now been confirmed by authorities in Taiwan that 2,192 people were killed, 8,735 were seriously injured, 97 remain missing or trapped in collapsed buildings, and approximately 100,000 were left homeless as a result of the earthquake, measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, which struck Taiwan in the early morning hours of Tuesday, 21 September.

Latest events

It still remains quite unclear how many people have sought shelter in tents outside their homes, and how many of those who stay in the evacuation centres in the worst hit counties actually have lost their homes in the earthquake or simply are too afraid to return to their houses - as no official registration of the homeless has yet taken place. Some residents have furthermore listed power cuts and lack of water as reasons for not being able to stay at home, although their houses may be intact. All power was knocked out throughout the island in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, and 90 per cent of electricity in Nantou county is still down. Electricity is rationed throughout the island, in an effort to accommodate most citizens. The main water reservoirs in Nantou and Taichung counties were damaged in the earthquake, and although there is no shortage of drinking water yet, local authorities have voiced their fears of outbreaks of epidemics due to the bad sanitation condition in the makeshift camps in parks and school yards.

Over 10,000 aftershocks have followed the earthquake, several exceeding 6.5 on the Richter scale which furthermore adds to the agitation of the earthquake survivors. Approximately 1,700 heavy duty

family-size tents from the Hong Kong Red Cross (a branch of the Red Cross Society of China) and the Federation have been distributed to the victims, and a further 3,300 will be distributed in the coming days. The rain which has prevailed for the last two days and the possibility of typhoons in the region heading towards Taiwan have raised concerns since the most common accommodation for the homeless are family sized tents and plastic sheeting.

The central government has decided to build at least 5,000 units of temporary housing in order to accommodate the homeless, but local authorities as well as the local population remain sceptical of the scheme, quoting experience from Kobe in Japan where the majority of the homeless preferred to find their own housing. The central government's offer to provide rent subsidies is furthermore stated as the main reason why people are less willing to move into temporary housing.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

From locally raised sources, the Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation provided USD 1.6 million to support procurement of a two months supply of food for 11,000 people living in shelters. It has furthermore allocated USD 3.9 million for the construction of 1,000 temporary housing units for the homeless planned by the central government. The funds were made available from local fund raising activities.

The Hong Kong Red Cross has already sent 1,000 tents, 3,000 flashlights, 5,700 sleeping bags, 1,000 plastic mats and four generators to Taipei - already being distributed by more than 150 Red Cross volunteers active in Nantou county. Local authorities requested 200 tents for schools in the county to be used as temporary classrooms in order to resume school activities, and have allocated three of four generators to be used by mobile medical teams providing services in remote areas.

Federation relief items, procured by the Japanese Red Cross, will arrive later this week and these include: 4,500 sleeping bags, 4,000 flashlights with batteries, and 30 generators. An additional 4,000 tents requested by the Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation have been procured by the Federation and will be distributed this week.

The Japanese Red Cross medical team finished its mission on 28 September, as the medical emergency phase is now over. Two Federation delegates travelled through Nantou and Taichung counties 30 September - 1 October, monitoring the situation and the activities carried out by the local Red Cross, as well as documenting the devastation caused by the earthquake. A senior liaison delegate will arrive on 7 October, to support the Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation and help with the coordination of Red Cross and Red Crescent activities.

Taipei county •

On Saturday, rescue work in the debris of the 12 storey Tunghsing building in Taipei city was officially called off. Twelve people are still believed to be buried under the rubble. More than 80 people were killed when the building collapsed, but 107 were saved by fire fighters and military rescue teams with the support of volunteers from the Taipei Red Cross chapter specially trained in first aid and rescue methods who worked on the site in 24-hour shifts since the disaster struck. The capital otherwise escaped unscathed from the devastating earthquake on 21 September.

One high rise apartment building also collapsed in Hsin Chuang city, in Taipei county, claiming the lives of dozens of people. Red Cross volunteers from the Taipei chapter were also involved in rescue work and first aid services on the scene from the very beginning.

Taichung county •

The most devastating effect of the earthquake was felt in Taichung county and Taichung City, where more than 1,160 people were killed, 4,720 were injured and around 40,000 families were left homeless. Many of the worst hit towns are believed to be located on the fault line, which poses a serious problem for reconstructing residential areas. Taichung City - the island's third largest city - was especially hit and a few high rise apartment buildings in the downtown area completely collapsed, claiming the lives of more than 100 people. Thousands of city residents are now homeless and cannot easily be accommodated in temporary housing. Furthermore, most of those made homeless in the rural areas belong to aboriginal tribes, especially devoted to the land of their ancestors, and simply refuse to be relocated. The threat of land- and mudslides, triggered by aftershocks and rain, also pose a major concern for the lives of inhabitants of mountainous villages who refuse to leave their homes and seek safety.

The need for heavy duty tents was voiced in a meeting with local authorities, but no official request has been made to the Red Cross. The county government has decided to build 1,000 temporary housing units in cooperation with a Buddhist charity organisation in addition to housing provided by the central government - but county officials remain sceptical of the solution and claim fewer victims than anticipated will make use of such an offer, as was the case in Kobe. The need for providing psychological support to the earthquake victims was also raised for the first time. Officials furthermore cautioned of possible disease outbreaks because of sanitation conditions, which remain poor in the evacuation centres.

Around 30 Red Cross volunteers from the Taichung chapter and from neighbouring counties were activated in the Taichung disaster emergency centre in a matter of hours after the earthquake struck on Tuesday morning, and have been organising relief donations and distribution from the very first day.

Nantou county •

Extensive distribution of local Red Cross and Federation relief items have been undertaken by the Nantou Red Cross chapter, where some 150 volunteers have been activated since the earthquake struck. The Red Cross immediately put up their centre within the disaster management centre in Nantou City, and has continued to enhance the visibility of the Red Cross through a well organized distribution mechanism. So far, the Federation relief items have only been distributed in Nantou, since no formal request has been received from other municipalities.

An estimated 80 percent of Nantou county's residents are believed to have sought shelter in tents and makeshift camps as the epicentre of the earthquake on 21 September and many of the aftershocks following it have been located in Nantou and Taichung counties. Furthermore, some earthquake victims interviewed stated that although their houses remained intact, they had no access to water and electricity and thus had to rely on evacuation centres in order to get food and water supplies - adding that they feared their houses might collapse in the more violent aftershocks.

Nantou is the second largest county in Taiwan, but most of its inhabitants live in rural areas so the casualties were not as high as in the neighbouring Taichung county. Some 800 people are reported to have been killed in the earthquake, and more than 2,400 were injured. More than 7,700 families lost their houses in the quake. All infrastructure suffered severe damage - dozens of bridges collapsed, roads were cut off, only 10 percent of the county's power plants are working, and water resources were destroyed. The damage done by landslides is also feared to have serious consequences for the main industries in the county.

Yunlin/Changwa counties •

Five buildings collapsed in Touliu city in Yunlin county (adjacent to Nantou and Taichung counties), leaving 60 people dead, more than 400 injured and 11 still buried under rubble, according to latest reports. More than 1,500 families have been reported homeless. One building collapsed in the neighbouring Changwa county, claiming the lives of 19 people. Approximately 390 were injured and 86 families lost their homes. Search and rescue work is over in these two counties, apart from some mountain areas where landslides have been reported.

Outstanding needs

At least 100,000 people are believed to be homeless due to the devastating earthquake, although no official registration of evacuees has yet taken place. Residents of Nantou and Taichung counties, the hardest hit areas, simply refuse to go home until all aftershocks are over, and civil engineers finish their evaluation of whether properties have suffered structural damages. Heavy duty tents remain to be the most needed immediate relief item, as family-sized tents, and plastic sheeting stretched over poles are the most common accommodation, providing little shelter from the sun, rain, and wind. The central government has announced that it will build 5,000 units of temporary housing on 13 sites in Nantou and Taichung, but such construction will take at least one month - underlining the need for a more immediate solution for those who remain outside their homes.

While sufficient food supplies have been donated and distributed to the evacuation centres, local authorities fear that this may no longer be the case within one month's time. The Taiwan Red Cross Organisation has already addressed part of this problem by preparing cooked meals for the coming two months for 11,000 evacuees staying in shelters. Further action in providing food for the victims may be needed at a later stage.

Electricity supplies remain rationed throughout the island, so generators are badly needed during the period it takes to restore the power plants in the affected areas. Authorities are also worried about sanitation conditions due to water shortage because of damaged water reservoirs, although no indication of actual outbreak of epidemics has been reported. Medical assistance provided by the local health system is still considered sufficient.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The International Federation is grateful for the prompt support shown by donors for this operation. The Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation will begin to evaluate the long-term needs of the homeless population, especially those currently in inadequate shelters.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department