

TAIPEI: EARTHQUAKE

15 October 1999

appeal no. 25/99

situation report no. 04

period covered: 4 - 11 October 1999

Ongoing damage assessments of buildings and homes has shown that initial estimates of 100,000 people having been left homeless as a result of the devastating earthquake three weeks ago were far too low. Current assessments put the figure at about 380,000, highlighting the even more urgent need for temporary housing. In addition to continued distribution of relief items, the Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation is also providing targeted support for construction of temporary housing units.

The context

The death toll from the earthquake which struck Taiwan on 21 September now stands at nearly 2,300 and approximately 9,000 were seriously injured. Authorities have confirmed that more than 82,000 housing units were totally or partially destroyed, which means that earlier estimates stating 100,000 people having lost their homes are far too low. According to official figures, the number of those made homeless as a result of the earthquake is more likely to exceed 380,000.

Latest events

Experts are in the process of completing their evaluation of the structural safety of buildings, and have already exceeded by far earlier estimates of housing units deemed completely or partially destroyed. The government had earlier announced plans of building 5,000 units of temporary housing, but since no survey has taken place yet of how many people will make use of the offer, there is no indication of how many housing units will be needed. The scheme has met with scepticism from both local authorities and residents, who state that rent subsidies for those who make their own housing arrangement promised by the government (approximately CHF 150 per person per month) is a much more attractive offer. The immediate need for construction of temporary housing has been underlined due to the fact that far more people have lost their homes than preliminary estimates showed and there is a lack of resources to accommodate the victims in the worst struck areas. The government is furthermore offering CHF 10,500 as compensation for those made homeless, as well as alleviation of mortgage payments, 20-year low interest loans to victims rebuilding their houses, and insurance and tax exemptions.

People are slowly moving back to their houses after sleeping in the open for three weeks. It is still clear that even if their houses remain intact they will not return home until architects and engineers have finished their inspections and rated them safe. However, the bulk of people staying in camps out of fear are expected to return home at the end of this week, as long as utilities such as electricity and water are in place by then.

Most health clinics and hospitals seem to have escaped unscathed from the earthquake, but more than 60 schools have already been identified as standing too close to the fault line. Dozens of schools were destroyed while others suffered severe damage. Concern for the lack of latrines and adequate sanitation facilities has been voiced by teachers, especially in Taichung county. Major concerns on sanitation conditions in the makeshift camps have been expressed, although no serious outbreaks of epidemics have yet been reported. Water reservoirs in the worst hit areas in the Taichung and Nantou counties remain contaminated, posing a threat to public health.

Considerable problems prevail in the co-ordination of relief operations, and in assessing the needs of the victims. It is not clear who is in charge of relief operations in the worst hit areas, and the local authorities, local NGOs and charity groups are disputing who should assume that role.

The immediate emergency phase is now over, and rehabilitation of the worst hit areas are now underway. To date, the Red Cross has distributed 3,400 tents, over 10,000 sleeping bags, 7,000 flashlights and 100 generators. A further 30 generators, procured in Japan, have arrived in the country.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Representatives of the Japanese Red Cross and the Federation's special liaison delegate held extensive meetings with senior officials of the Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation, defining plans of action to assist earthquake victims in the worst hit areas during the rehabilitation phase.

The Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation has raised more than USD 15 million through local and overseas donations and has provided USD 1.6 million to support procurement of a two month supply of food for 11,000 people living in shelters. It has furthermore allocated USD 6.5 million for the construction of 1,000 temporary housing units for the homeless planned by the authorities. The construction of the first 250 houses will begin this week in the town of Dungshr, which is one of the worst struck regions in Taichung county - with casualty figures exceeding 500 people.

The Hong Kong Red Cross has sent 1,400 tents, 3,000 flashlights, 5,700 sleeping bags, 1,000 plastic mats and 100 generators to Taipei - already distributed by more than 150 Red Cross volunteers active in Nantou county. The International Federation has furthermore distributed 2,000 tents to Nantou and Taichung counties. Federation relief items, procured by the Japanese Red Cross including 4,500 sleeping bags, 4,000 flashlights with batteries, and 30 generators, arrived in Taipei on 8 October.

Outstanding needs

Some 84,000 families (or approximately 380,000 people) are now believed to be homeless as a result of the massive earthquake.

Housing is not available in the worst hit areas and there is a clear need for some kind of temporary housing. A leading Buddhist charity group has published plans of accommodation for 30,000 people. The Taiwanese Red Cross Organisation has already committed itself to provide 1,000 housing units, however, the local government has yet to identify the sites where the temporary communities will be set up.

Although food is still widely available in the makeshift camps and in local distribution centres within the worst hit regions, it is clear that these voluntary donations will soon dry up as the emergency phase is over. Food support for the earthquake victims might, therefore, become necessary at a later stage. Local authorities have furthermore stated concerns about sanitation conditions and contaminated drinking water, which may pose a health threat to the worst struck communities. Some medical support to rural health clinics is also needed. Restoration of schools is also required in the rehabilitation stage.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

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