

TAIPEI: EARTHQUAKE

26 May 2000

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BUDGET

REVISION

The emergency phase of the operation has now been completed and the rehabilitation programme involving the Taiwan Red Cross Organisation (TRCO) is well underway. The international response to the Federation request for assistance received overwhelming support and is enabling the TRCO to support a range of rehabilitation projects, from rebuilding to community support and disaster preparedness.

The context

The 7.6 Richter scale earthquake which struck the island of Taiwan on 21 September 1999, left 2,368 dead, more than 10,000 seriously injured and over 300,000 homeless. The earthquake caused extensive structural destruction in the worst hit areas, near the epicentre in Nantou and Taichung counties. Severe aftershocks triggered large mudslides that also caused serious damage. In October, another earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale hit Chiayi County, causing further destruction to central Taiwan.

The scale of the disaster prompted the International Federation, in consultation with the Taiwan Red Cross Organization (TRCO), to launch an international request for assistance seeking CHF 3.3 million (USD 2.2 million) on 24 September, 1999, to support the relief operation with basic relief supplies for the earthquake victims. It was stated that funds might also be required at a later stage for rehabilitation and reconstruction, given the large number of people left homeless.

The emergency phase

The TRCO was heavily involved in the emergency relief operation from the very start. In addition to assisting with search and rescue efforts, volunteers distributed food and other relief materials to people living in makeshift camps. During the emergency phase the International Federation, together with the Japanese Red Cross, provided 2,900 tents, 5,000 sleeping bags, 4,000 flashlights and 30 generators, distributed by Red Cross volunteers to the worst hit areas of Nantou and Taichung counties. It distributed the last 400 tents to victims of the Chiayi earthquake in late October.

The Federation and the Japanese Red Cross dispatched an eight-member relief and medical team to Taiwan the day of the earthquake, to carry out the initial needs assessment. An information/reporting delegate was sent to cover the early stages of relief, and a finance delegate from the Kuala Lumpur regional delegation was assigned to the project to oversee finances.

The Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), sent financial aid to Taipei on the first day of the disaster and opened a nationally advertised bank account for public donations, as well as keeping a 24-hour nation wide telephone line open for donations. The Hong Kong Red Cross, in coordination with the Federation, sent some 2,000 tents, flashlights, sleeping bags, plastic mats and 100 generators for distribution in Nantou county.

The emergency phase of the operation has now been completed.

Red Cross/Red Crescent rehabilitation programme

The total economic losses caused by the earthquake are estimated at CHF 13.5 billion (USD 9 billion). The Taiwan government has pledged CHF 7.5 million (USD 5 billion) for the rehabilitation phase, to be spent within 5 years. In addition to committing itself to construct prefabricated houses, the government will provide rent subsidies for those left homeless after the disaster, as well as low cost government apartments with low down payments and interest rates.

Because of the overwhelming response -- CHF 56.6 million -- to the International Federation's request for assistance, the Federation/TRCO are in a position to make a substantial contribution to the rehabilitation phase of assistance to earthquake victims. The TRCO and the Federation jointly are financially supporting the following projects, for a total amount of CHF 48.2 million:

Temporary housing: The TRCO and the Federation will provide funding to support the building and furnishing of 1,886 temporary houses out of some 5,600 units the authorities have committed themselves to constructing. The Federation will provide 17.8 million Swiss francs to fund 1,286 housing units for communities in Nantou County, Taichung County, Miaoli County and Taichung City. Each house is approximately 36 square metres and comprises one living room/kitchen, two bedrooms and a bath/toilet. Each community consists of roughly 100-200 housing units.

Basic household items: The TRCO and the Federation have provided 5,205 families living in prefabricated houses with items such as blankets, quilts, a water boiler, and a radio. The cost is equally divided, and the Federation share comes to CHF 215,800. In addition, the TRCO provided each household with one television set and a refrigerator, and a washing machine shared by every two households.

Financial support: The target group received financial support from the TRCO and the Federation are the 5,000 families living in temporary houses who lost all or most of their belongings during the earthquake. The minimum wages in Taiwan are around CHF 750 per month, and the Red Cross contribution was equivalent to approximately 10 weeks of minimum income. The Federation supported this project with a total contribution of CHF 5.1 million.

Renovation of schools: More than 80 schools in central Taiwan suffered structural damage during the earthquake. A rapid re-establishment of the school system is considered a major priority, not only so that children continue their education, but also to assist them in their psychological recovery from the trauma of the earthquake. The TRCO will underwrite the construction of 17 schools in Nantou, Taichung and Yunlin counties, of which the Federation will financially support ten. Construction has started, and will directly benefit more than 3,800 students. The Federation's share is estimated at CHF 19.2 million.

Health care centres: The project aims at supporting the construction of 3 health care centres in Jen Ai village in Nantou county, which is predominantly inhabited by aboriginal tribes: 15,000 people living in this village have to travel a long distance to the main health care centre. CHF 1.6 million (USD 1 million) will be allocated to this project.

Community running fund: CHF 3.4 million will be allocated to fund public health activities, the maintenance and repair of common facilities, as well as the communal activities of the residents of villages of prefabricated houses. Many temporary housing communities have formed a surveillance committee made up of volunteers who organise a community watch for security reasons, as the settlements are not protected in any way.

Disaster preparedness: Taking into account that Taiwan is in a disaster prone area, the TRCO will increase its response capacity through the implementation of a disaster preparedness project. The project will include the setting up of 25 emergency response teams totalling some 1,000 trained volunteers equipped with communication material and transportation. CHF 850,000 will be allocated for the implementation of this project.

Management of assistance projects

The TRCO will mainly provide financial support to local governmental rehabilitation schemes. The authorities concerned will be entirely responsible for the management and implementation of the rehabilitation projects receiving Red Cross funding.

The Federation has contracted PriceWaterhouseCoopers in Taiwan to monitor and report on all of the projects making up the rehabilitation programme, as well as to provide financial management of the operation. This is being done in close cooperation with the TRCO. A senior Federation liaison delegate worked closely with the TRCO and the Japanese Red Cross on the rehabilitation phase preparation.

The TRCO's and Federation's primary target group are people living in prefabricated houses, since clearly those who make use of the government's temporary housing scheme simply cannot afford any other options, or have no other choice because of the housing shortage. All of those eligible for temporary housing are former homeowners who will be paying off a mortgage for years to come on a property that no longer exists. Although most hold a job, they cannot afford to pay rent, despite the governmental subsidies, nor an additional mortgage on a second home for an unforeseen period of time.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

It is clear that people living in temporary housing will need further Red Cross assistance, if they are to stand a chance of starting anew. Providing accommodation, as well as financial assistance will enable families to get back on the road to recovery .

Although the health care system in Taiwan remained intact after the earthquake, some vulnerable communities have been badly affected by the severe damage to remote health care posts. In restoring health services to aboriginal settlements, which all belong to the same administrative village, it is important to provide all tribes access to the same quality of health care. A damaged health post should not be rebuilt without restructuring the whole health care system of that village, in order to ensure equal rights among the different settlements.

Schools were disproportionately hard hit by the disaster, compared to other public and official buildings since their construction is the responsibility of local authorities, who are often short of funds. In addition, no standard building code exists at this level. As a result, many of these buildings could not withstand the earthquake's force.

In the coming months the Federation, in collaboration with National Societies, will look at the possibility of utilising unspent funds to support disaster preparedness projects in the Asia/Pacific region and in particular in countries facing natural disasters such as earthquakes.

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