

VENEZUELA: FLOODS

27 December 1999

*appeal no. 35/99
situation report no. 3
period covered: 25-26 December*

Over seventy per cent of the International Federation's preliminary appeal target has now been met. A 13 person team is currently in the country supporting the Venezuelan Red Cross (VRC) in their efforts to respond to the emergency and assessing the still changing situation in order to address further needs. Four Participating National Societies are already working in co-operation with the National Society and the Federation.

The disaster

Eleven days of continuous rainfall in Venezuela from December 8 to 19 provoked serious flooding and landslides in the Federal District of Caracas, as well as in the States of Miranda, Vargas, Nueva Esparta (the island of Margarita), Yaracuy, Falcon, Carabobo, Zulia and Tachira. The downpour created rivers that overflowed their banks and swept through poor districts in the capital of Caracas. Thousands of homes were destroyed, turning streets into fields of thick mud, strewn with tree trunks, rocks and boulders. The worst hit areas in Caracas were those with shantytowns perched precariously on steep mountainsides where one third of the residents live. Outside of the capital, entire communities located in coastal valleys were destroyed by the mass of mud dragged from the mountains to the coast.

The death toll remains difficult to confirm as thousands of bodies are estimated to be buried under the mud. Reports vary widely, ranging from an official figure of 1,500 dead to as many as 30,000 according to media reports and other unofficial sources. Over 600,000 persons are estimated to have been directly affected. According to initial assessments there are close to 64,000 houses damaged and over 23,000 destroyed.

Latest events

The state of emergency declared by the government immediately following the disaster is still in force. A curfew has been established throughout the affected areas and national police brigades are present 24 hours a day.

The overall organisation of the emergency operation is being carried out by the military, and a co-ordination centre has been established in Maiquetía airport, located some 25 kilometres from Caracas. According to the latest official reports there are some 131 collective centres already organised throughout the country, most of which are located in the Caracas Federal District and in military settlements. Food and other basic relief items are being provided in the collective centres by the military with the support of local voluntary groups. Meanwhile, the movement of displaced people seeking shelter in neighbouring states continues. Although no exact figures are yet available it is estimated that a significant number of people are seeking shelter with host families. It is unlikely that those staying with host families are not being registered as recipients for government aid.

According to most assessments, water and sanitation is at this point the most critical problem. Water systems in most of the affected area have been severely damaged and it is not clear when they will be repaired. In order to avoid the outbreak of epidemics, the government is aiming to evacuate people from some of the worst affected areas, such as the State of Vargas, as soon as possible.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Venezuelan Red Cross w

15 out of the National Society's 23 local branches are involved in the response to the emergency. Medical teams are supporting the affected population in some of the collective centres set up throughout the country, mainly providing psychological counselling. Another key activity has been the transportation of patients to hospital. To date, the Society has distributed over 180 tons of drinking water, hygiene kits and food in six communities of the Vargas State. In the local branches of Valencia and Lara, the VRC is collecting public donations and carrying out further relief distributions. The Aragua branch has prepared a three month plan of action to assist 3,000 people with food and other relief supplies as well as providing medical assistance.

International Federation w

A team of 13 delegates is in the country supporting the VRC in the areas of relief, health, telecommunications, reporting, information and the restoration of family links. A water and sanitation delegate is expected to arrive in the coming days. The team of delegates is supported by the Guatemala City Regional Delegation and the Federation Secretariat in Geneva.

The draft plan of action prepared jointly by the VRC, Participating National Society (PNS) representatives and the International Federation will be revised and adapted to the changing situation of the affected population which is still being evaluated by the Red Cross teams deployed in the field. A larger appeal will be prepared in the coming days.

Co-ordination meetings between the International Federation, the Venezuelan Red Cross and PNS representatives in the country are taking place on a daily basis. A disaster operations centre is being set up at the VRC headquarters.

The Federation's Secretary General and the Head of the Americas department are expected to arrive in Caracas today. Besides meetings with the Venezuelan Red Cross and PNS representatives, they are also scheduled to meet with the Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Search and rescue: A three delegate rescue team from the Dominican Red Cross arrived on December 21 and is working in the emergency zone of Punta Mulatos, Macuto, La Guaira and Maiquetia. They are transported to the region daily by helicopter as the access routes are still blocked.

Relief distributions: Within the framework of the plan of action, it is envisaged that monthly food and hygiene kits will be distributed to the affected population, as well as cooking sets, shelter items (including beds, mattresses and bed linen) and water supplies (including jerry cans and purification tablets) sets. Contacts have already been made with local suppliers and procurement is expected to begin in the coming days.

Logistics: A 10,000 m² warehouse located 8 kms from the VRC's headquarters has been made available to the organisation and is now fully operational. Co-ordination with the military forces at the Simon Bolivar International Airport is taking place in order to facilitate the reception of goods being airlifted into the country.

Health: The International Federation's regional health delegate held a meeting with the health directors of all the VRC branches located in the affected areas and a representative of both the American and Spanish Red Cross Societies. A plan of action for health, including psychological support and public health information campaigns, was agreed upon.

Family Link Programme: Additional tracing services are being provided. 30 VRC volunteers are manning the toll-free telephone line, and to date 6,000 tracing requests have been received and are being processed.

Telecommunications: An International Federation telecoms delegate is currently assessing the VRC's telecoms capacity and requirements, and establishing a plan of action to strengthen the network. The initial results of the assessment indicate that the VRC's current telecommunication network is weak, with no local staff available to operate the central telecommunication centre. The available telephone lines are not sufficient and there is only one computer with access to the internet. Two satellite phone have been sent to Venezuela from Geneva.

Participating National Societies w

American Red Cross: The American Red Cross team is carrying out assessments to plan for emergency and longer term support programmes for those affected by the disaster. Seven 4x4 vehicles will be donated to the VRC in the coming days, together with 50,000 pounds of relief supplies including one generator, blankets, sheets, water containers, tents and family hygiene kits.

Spanish Red Cross: Two delegates are now in the country supporting the VRC current activities and identifying further projects. The relief items flown in last week have been distributed to collective shelters.

German Red Cross: With the support of ECHO, basic food supplies for 3,000 families will be purchased to assist the relief operation. The Society also plans to rent two water trucks to provide drinking water to 100,000 people throughout the Vargas State littoral coast route. A German Red Cross representative is presently in the country and a water and sanitation delegate is expected to arrive on Thursday.

French Red Cross: A team of two French Red Cross delegates has arrived and will focus on supporting water and sanitation activities. An aircraft has also arrived with 18 boxes of

hygiene kits and 50 kg sacs of sugar. In the coming days a significant quantity of water and sanitation equipment will be airlifted to Venezuela by the Society.

British Red Cross: The British Red Cross is providing two delegates to the Federation team. A logistics co-ordinator is already in Caracas and a finance/administration delegate is due to arrive this week.

Red Cross action in the region: Both the Costa Rica and Honduras Red Cross Societies have launched emergency appeals to support the operation in Venezuela. Other Latin American and Caribbean National Societies are planning to launch similar appeals.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Co-ordination meetings between Unicef, OCHA, OFDA, WFP, ECHO, the World Bank and the Red Cross have started and are expected to be held on a daily basis.

During a press conference organised by the VRC, the President of the Society presented the Red Cross/Red Crescent Plan of Action in support of the flood victims.

It is estimated that to date, over 50 interviews and briefings have been given to the international and national media. Although media interest is declining, a CNN team still in the country made a report yesterday on the family link programme.

Outstanding needs

Basic relief items are urgently needed as well as the provision of drinking water and proper distribution systems. Vehicles are required as soon as possible in order to carry out the planned relief action. Further contributions are required to fully cover the preliminary appeal target.

For further information please contact Luis Luna, Federation Desk Officer at phone: + 41 22 730 4274 or by email: luna@ifrc.org

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Santiago Gil,
Director
Americas Department