

VENEZUELA: FLOODS

31 December 1999

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Relief efforts continue in the affected areas, despite communications constraints which are hampering distribution activities. Flights with relief aid continue arriving. Procurements of relief supplies are being initiated in Panama. Drinking water is being distributed throughout the most affected communities. With rain again falling in the region, forecasts predict a further threat to the population in risk. An Emergency Appeal including rehabilitation programs will be launched in the coming few days.

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 caused rivers to overflow their banks, sweeping through poor districts in the capital of Caracas. Thousands of homes were destroyed, and streets were turned into fields of thick mud strewn with tree trunks, rocks and boulders. The worst hit areas in the capital were those with shantytowns perched precariously on steep mountainsides where one third of the residents live. Entire communities located on coastal valleys were destroyed or have disappeared in the mass of mud which shifted from the mountains to the coast.

Although the official death toll is still very low, the media and other unofficial sources estimate up to 50,000 deaths. Over 600,000 persons are estimated to have been directly affected, and according to the Venezuelan Civil Defense's initial damage assessments there are at least 64,707 houses affected and over 23,200 destroyed.

Update

The National Emergency Committee reported to the Government, providing information that the first phase of the emergency (search and rescue) had been concluded. However, it is reported that some areas in the state of Miranda are still isolated and urgently require relief assistance. The Venezuelan Red Cross has expressed a readiness to cooperate with the authorities in assisting these communities as soon as they can be reached.

With heavy rains falling in the northern states of the country, the National Meteorological Center predicts that there is a potential threat to the Federal District and the states of Miranda, Vargas, Falcòn, Anzoàtegui, Monagas, Nueva Esparta, Sucre, Yaracuy, Zulia, Aragua and Carabobo.

With the opening of the access routes in the States of Vargas, thousands of affected people have returned to their homes with the aim of finding any family, friends or neighbours belongings. Due to the identification of more than 40 infrastructure failures, the Caracas Mayor has requested the Government to declare the Caracas- La Guaira highway a state of emergency. The Government has asked the population to abstain from using the road unless except in of extreme urgency.

Media reports have mentioned the risk of water intoxication in the La Guaira harbor. The Ministry of Health remains on alert in case of possible epidemic outbreaks in the affected states. A list of preventive measures has been published. A group of 27 doctors, health workers, and sociologists were sent to the state of Vargas to implement an environmental epidemic control system with the aim of controlling any outbreak in the region.

WFP will implement a USD 200,000 food urgency plan for affected people located in shelters and military barracks over the course of 15 days. Other WFP actions are being planned.

The number of collective centers organized throughout the country has increased to 429. In two weeks a total of 6,360 houses will be available for 30,000 persons. It is expected that during the next 6-10 months a total of 5,000 houses will also be constructed by official agencies for the affected people. According to reports from the Sub-Secretary of Agriculture, approximately 35,000 hectares of farmland remain flooded. An estimated 3,600 rural families have been affected. The Government has outlined a four-year plan for the rehabilitation of the agricultural infrastructure.

In the State of Vargas, more than 2,000 victims of the floods have invaded 10 buildings left vacant by other affected people who had left their homes when the disaster occurred.

The President of the country has officially congratulated all search and rescue teams which have arrived to support rescue activities, as well as five rescuers and first aiders from the Dominican Red Cross.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Venezuelan Red Cross w

Local branches in the affected areas continue distribution activities and health assistance while monitoring the evolving situation.

International Federation w

The International Federation launched a preliminary appeal seeking CHF 4,460,000 to support 50,000 persons during 90 days.

A team of 19 Federation and PNS delegates is in the country supporting the VRC in the areas of relief, health, telecommunications, reporting, information and family linking activities. A water and sanitation delegate has been assessing the situation since Wednesday, 29 December. Field delegates have been assigned to cover the States of Falcon, Vargas, Valencia, Zulia and Miranda. A water and sanitation delegate provided by the German Red Cross arrived in Venezuela on December 29.

The results of the needs assessment, conducted by the VRC, the Federation, and the PNS team, are being analyzed in preparation for the launching of the full Emergency Appeal that will include rehabilitation and community based programs in the areas of health, water and sanitation and housing. The operation is expected to last one year.

A finance delegate has joined the Federation team.

Co-ordination meetings with the Venezuelan Red Cross and PNS representatives in the country continue taking place on a daily basis.

Relief distributions: the International Federation relief team continues to support the VRC in the distribution of goods. Contacts have already been made with suppliers in Venezuela, Panama and other locations.

Logistics: The Federation has placed an order to purchase 25,000 food parcels in Panama while considering procurement possibilities in Venezuela. Aircraft from the Aruba Red Cross, Spanish Red Cross and Mexican Red Cross were sent with relief supplies. Two more aircraft loaded with jerry cans and blankets from the British Red Cross are expected to arrive in the next days. A logistics cell in Panama has been opened, is operational, and can also be used to support PNS operations. A clearing agent and a commercial trucking company will be contracted to overcome the logistical constraints. A Danish Red Cross donation of 20,000 blankets were forwarded to Venezuela, and another 4,000 blankets remain to be sent. Trucks donated by the German Red Cross will strengthen the logistics capacity. The French Red Cross have sent water units.

Health: the Ministry of Health has issued list of required medicines, much in line with the WHO New Emergency Health Kits (NEHK). VRC in particular needs medicines against mycosis and parasites, as well as Oral Rehydration Salt and basic antibiotics.

In consultation with PNSs and the VRC, a rapid health needs assessment has been carried out by the Regional Health Delegate, highlighting priority areas in the flood affected communities and in temporary shelters. The operational focus will be on direct interventions, health education, preventive health and mobile clinics. Safe water and restored sanitation is imperative. A detailed needs assessment is ongoing. The French and Spanish National Societies have contributed with mobile water plants, in addition to amounts of chlorine shipped by the American Red Cross. Food security is of major concern, and a first lot of 25,000 food parcels will arrive from Panama within days.

Psychological support is badly needed; the American and Mexican Red Cross have carried out assessments, and plan to start up initial programmes. Epidemiological surveillance and vector control is in considerable need to prevent outbreaks of cholera, malaria, dengue and other epidemics.

Tracing Program: From the 6,000 demands received, a total 429 have been resolved.

Telecommunications: Contacts with VHF local radio companies have been made in three authorized points where VRC would be able to set up an antenna. Efforts are underway to arrange a radio frequency license through the Ministry of Transport and Communications. Several new desk-phone/fax lines and 30 mobile phones were purchased this week by the Venezuelan Red Cross. An assessment of other telecommunication needs will be made.

Participating National Societies (PNS) w

All PNS's continue to work in close cooperation with the Federation Secretariat and the VRC both in Venezuela and at the Geneva level.

Latin American and Caribbean Societies: Several National Societies are participating in the operation through national fundraising campaigns, dispatching of relief goods, sending of delegates and other Red Cross workers, as well as other forms of support. An inventory of these regional actions is being set up for the next report.

American Red Cross: The American field team is assisting VRC in the family reunification programme and is supporting the coordination of relief supplies and procurement. American Red Cross plans to keep a team in the field for approximately three months. The Society has also taken the lead in the preparation of a relief distribution Plan of Action to be jointly carried out by all PNS, VRC and Federation. The seven 4x4 vehicles donated by ARC arrived yesterday (30 December).

Spanish Red Cross: The Society now has four delegates in the country. Two of them are information experts preparing a video documentary for their Society's fundraising campaign. Two additional delegates are expected to arrive in early January. Ten more water plants are planned to be sent from Honduras.

German Red Cross: The water distribution operation has been initiated with the availability of three 18,000 litre water trucks. First distributions are taking place in the state of Vargas. A four delegate team, including a water-sanitation expert, is currently supporting the operation. There are indications that ECHO might support a rehabilitation programme proposed by the National Society. Trucks donated by Mercedes Benz in Venezuela were handed over to VRC to reinforce their logistics capacity. Kitchen sets are planned to arrive on January 3.

French Red Cross: French delegates have participated, on their own, in several meetings with WHO, CARE, MSF, OXFAM and the State water authorities to discuss issues concerning water plants systems, legal authorizations to use natural water sources to be used for distribution to the affected population, transportation and sanitary education campaigns. 8 mobile water treatment units have arrived, and site selection for these units is ongoing, supervised by the French Red Cross Wat-San delegate.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Coordination meetings with all UN agencies and major NGOs active in Venezuela are now taking place every two days, and the Federation is actively participating.

The Secretary General's visit to Venezuela had a wide press coverage. Sporadic phone interviews and briefings are taking place and contacts with international agencies based in the country are maintained.

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. We request all National Societies to advise in advance with clearance documentation so that the Venezuelan Red Cross and the Federation can provide effective reception and tracking of the in-kind donations.

Contributions

The Preliminary Appeal has now been full covered through an important donation by the Kuwait Red Crescent. See annex 1 for details of the full list of contributions. This annex will be updated to reflect the Kuwait Red Crescent contribution in the next situation report.

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