

UGANDA: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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The Uganda Red Cross Society (URCS), supported by the Federation, continues to assist a large number of internally displaced persons and refugees in the north, west and south west of Uganda. The focus of URCS reforms remains on institutional strengthening, increasing branch capacity, improving programme quality, and on consolidating programme activities in line with the four core areas adopted in Strategy 2010 and reflected in the Country Assistance Strategy 2000-2001. Funding is urgently needed for several programmes of assistance, particularly in the critical area of disaster preparedness.

The context

Uganda's economy continues to benefit from relative stability and significant support from the World Bank and donors (donors recently pledged US\$2.5 billion in assistance over the next three years). The National Budget was presented in June and received a favourable response from donors and key community groups. The government remains committed to the issues of poverty eradication and addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but continues to suffer from a lack of capacity to implement programmes. Lower global prices for Uganda's main export, coffee, and high oil prices are increasing the country's current account deficit, this will slow GDP growth and continue to put downward pressure on the currency.

While the government has been able to attract significant private sector investment to Uganda in recent years, current investor confidence is weak and there continue to be very significant regional variations in economic development. There has been some escalation of political tensions between Uganda and Rwanda, particularly in relation to the implementation of the Lusaka Peace Agreement and the demilitarisation of Kisangani in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Clashes between the Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) and rebel groups in the west and north of Uganda continue to hamper efforts for relief and development for large numbers of Ugandans and refugees and have led to new displacements.

A referendum on the future of the political system in Uganda was held in late June, and this appears likely to result in a clear victory for the no-party 'Movement' system supported by the government of President Yoweri Museveni. The government paid increased attention to security issues in the lead up to the referendum and sources are predicting an increase in domestic tensions in the lead up to national elections due in 2001.

Latest events

Tensions between Ugandan and Rwandan troops and their allies in Kisangani (DRC) escalated into fighting in June resulting in a large number of military and civilian casualties. The Ugandan and Rwandan forces have now withdrawn from Kisangani and are reportedly complying with the UN sponsored Lusaka Peace Agreement, however, there remain concerns that local rebel groups will continue to fight. Ugandan President Museveni and Rwandan President Kagame have agreed to meet in July to discuss compliance with the Agreement and a reduction in tensions between all the parties involved.

The activities of Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and Lords Resistance Army (LRA) rebel groups in the north and west of Uganda continue to result in small numbers of civilian casualties, child abductions and new population displacements. The UPDF has been involved in a number of skirmishes with rebel groups but on the whole appears to be pursuing a policy of containment rather than engagement.

Small numbers of refugees continue to arrive in south west Uganda (around 200/month since February 2000). These are primarily Rwandans who have been living outside camps in northern Tanzania who are under pressure from Tanzanian authorities to return to Rwanda. The steady trickle of new arrivals is likely to exceed what can be absorbed by current URCS relief operations. More arrivals are expected in coming months after the harvest in northwestern Tanzania. In light of this, and the continuing tensions in DRC with Rwanda, the Federation has recently strengthened its radio and telephone communication network at key URCS branches near border crossing points in the south west.

Drought conditions prevail throughout the country, particularly in the north. Early warning sources confirm that cereals production has been affected by inadequate rains throughout April and May. While the situation in Uganda does not yet warrant a separate relief appeal, food security issues are being closely monitored. Additionally, a number of outbreaks of cholera and measles have been recorded throughout the first half of 2000.

Red Cross / Red Crescent Action

Disaster Response

In accordance with its contracts with the UNHCR and WFP, the URCS continued to provide ongoing relief, care and maintenance assistance to the refugee communities in Mbarara district. The Federation formally completed the hand-over of management responsibility for the relief operation in early February 2000, although delegates continue to provide limited technical support. The project is seeking to mobilise support for non-food items in order to replace those items which were issued to refugees some years ago but have worn out with prolonged use. A small but steady influx of new arrivals has run-down existing relief and contingency stocks and is placing pressure on facilities in Nakivale, one of the two camps managed by URCS.

The URCS continued to work on finalising its disaster relief policy with support from the Federation. A final draft of the policy has been produced and will be presented to the board for approval in the second half of the year.

Disaster Preparedness

URCS and the Federation have been major contributors to the updating of a disaster contingency plan for south west Uganda. The plan has drawn together representatives from UNHCR, the Government of Uganda, WFP, NGOs and the Red Cross movement to present a framework for responsibility and cooperation in the event of a humanitarian crisis in the south west of Uganda in the districts bordering DRC, Rwanda and Tanzania. The updating of the plan was initiated at a workshop in Mbarara in mid-May and the contingency plan is expected to be completed in July. The Federation and URCS hope to use the final plan and the URCS disaster policy as a basis for formalising an agreement between the URCS and Government of Uganda on disaster management.

The focus of the disaster preparedness programme for 2000-2001 remains on strengthening capacity in strategic branches, training Red Cross Action Teams and on stockpiling some non-food items in strategic locations to enable a rapid response to local emergencies.

Health

With the support of the American Red Cross, URCS undertook a pilot project in support of measles vaccination during March and April 2000. Red Cross volunteers were involved in social mobilisation activities in three districts, in support of the National Government's campaign to vaccinate children against measles. An evaluation of the pilot programme was recently conducted involving representatives of the American Red Cross, Federation Secretariat, Centre for Disease Control and local URCS and Ministry of Health staff and volunteers. The preliminary findings of the evaluation were that the social mobilisation activities of URCS volunteers had significantly increased awareness of the vaccination campaign and contributed to a high turn out in the target districts.

The American Red Cross and the URCS are currently developing a new programme in support of routine vaccination throughout Uganda. The programme will draw on the networks of Red Cross volunteers in the community and work closely with the Ugandan Ministry of Health at district level to encourage mothers to vaccinate their children and reduce the incidence of diseases like measles in Uganda. The programme is being developed by the URCS as part of its response to the Africa Red Cross Health Initiative 2010 (ARCHI).

Red Cross Week: 2-8 May 2000

The URCS conducted a successful ***blood donor recruitment*** campaign during the annual 'Red Cross Week' from 2 - 8 May. Blood donor recruitment activities received good publicity and enjoyed a strong response from the public with about 3,000 units of blood being collected from centres set up throughout the country. The number of units collected exceeded target expectations and have enabled the Uganda Blood Transfusion Service to meet forecast needs for the next few months.

The URCS also undertook a number of successful ***fundraising*** activities in conjunction with activities to celebrate World Red Cross Day on 8 May. Red Cross youth door-to-door collections and a formal fundraising dinner were successful in raising net funds of around USD 2,000. The URCS continues to generate most of its local funding through a lottery project with mobile phone company MTN, rental return on property, small income generating activities at branch level and through membership fees. URCS has recently received support from the Netherlands Red Cross to strengthen its local fundraising capacity.

The programme of events staged throughout 'Red Cross Week' in early May provided a good opportunity for the URCS to ***promote humanitarian values*** with the Government, media and broader Ugandan community. Tracing and dissemination activities continued to receive support from the ICRC and sessions on dissemination were included in staff workshops under the various programmes and focusing on the branch level.

Capacity Building

The Federation continues to provide technical advice to strengthen governance and management, improve financial systems, mobilise resources and strengthen branch capacity within the URCS.

National Society development

The Federation Logistics delegate position was phased out in late February with the successful hand over of the Mbarara relief operation and the establishment of sound logistics procedures within the URCS.

A successful Partners Meeting was held over 2-3 March and the Federation delegation and URCS have subsequently pursued an ambitious agenda for institutional development and programme improvement with support from National Society partners.

A Deputy Secretary General with responsibility for programmes was appointed by the URCS in March and this position was complemented with the appointment of a Federation Programme Coordination delegate in mid-April.

In February, the Netherlands Red Cross provided a consultant in the area of human resource management to assist the URCS in rewriting job descriptions and reviewing staff regulations and benefits. URCS staff are currently being placed on new contracts to reflect changes in responsibilities, terms and conditions.

The Federation continued to support the development of the central accounting system with support from the ICRC and British Red Cross. ICRC funded programmes have now been successfully incorporated into URCS accounting systems. Programme areas and partner National Societies are now benefiting from improved financial reporting.

The signing of a new URCS and Federation MoU is pending while further discussions take place.

Branch capacity building

In mid-June the URCS conducted a five-day planning workshop for branch field officers and senior branch staff. The workshop focused on the themes of integrating programming and the devolution of programming responsibilities to branches. The workshop provided an opportunity to brainstorm ways for improving staff efficiency and effectiveness in delivering services to the most vulnerable. The workshop also presented an opportunity for branch staff to make a contribution at the beginning of the annual programme planning cycle.

Outstanding needs

The ongoing refugee relief operations in the south west of Uganda remain under pressure. It is difficult to attract funding from traditional donors for ongoing care and maintenance activities in the refugee camps and consequently difficult to assist vulnerable people through the transition from relief to development. With the steady trickle of new arrivals, and decisions by local authorities to locate new arrivals well away from existing facilities, there is an urgent need to provide new water and sanitation facilities as well as basic non-food items. Minimum standards for disaster response to new arrivals are not being met.

The URCS disaster preparedness programme remains seriously under-funded while instability and the need for effective disaster preparedness and planning is intensifying throughout the Great Lakes region. Threats to food security are also increasing in the region and there is an urgent need to extend disaster preparedness activities to areas in the east and north of Uganda which are at a high risk of being affected by drought.

The URCS health programme is fully funded (at a reduced budget) but requires additional assistance to develop new activities under the ARCHI initiative and would benefit from technical assistance with the commercialisation of first aid activities.

The URCS is the only National Society in Africa without its own headquarters, but a property has recently been procured which will serve as the new headquarters.

The Federation delegation in Kampala has been greatly reduced in size over the last two years and is now focusing on specialised support in the key technical areas of disaster response and preparedness, institutional development, financial systems development and programme improvement. The ability of the delegation to provide technical assistance is currently being undermined by an acute shortage of funds, this is in turn affecting the ability of the URCS to make the transition towards being a well functioning and self-sustaining National Society.

External relations: Government / UN / NGOs / Media

The Federation and URCS continue to enjoy excellent external relations with agencies in Uganda. The URCS is in the process of finalising a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Health in relation to the provision of services to the most vulnerable. It is hoped that this MOU will lay the ground work for closer cooperation with Government in the areas of measles vaccination and HIV/AIDS awareness.

The Federation and URCS have an excellent working relationship with Government, UN and non-governmental agencies involved in disaster relief and preparedness throughout Uganda. The development of an updated disaster contingency plan for south west Uganda has involved close cooperation between the Red Cross, UNHCR, WFP, MSF and the office of Prime Minister. The URCS also hopes to sign an MOU with the Government in relation to the provision of relief services to the most vulnerable in Uganda.

The Red Cross enjoys the benefits of a constructive and supportive relationship with the local media. There is regular coverage of URCS activities and events in the press and electronic media and a good understanding by the media of the mandate and mission of the Red Cross. Free publicity provided by the media for Red Cross Week activities was important for ensuring strong sponsor and community support for blood donation and fundraising activities.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

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