

IRAQ: Humanitarian Assistance

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Scheduled programme activities carried out in the first quarter included the handing over of the last of 12 refurbished primary health care centres, community health information sessions that reached over 30,000 people and 16 first aid training workshops. A new strategic approach to address the multiple needs in the country in the fields of health, rehabilitation, relief and development is being designed and the general programme areas are described in the report.

The context

The impact of two wars in the past nearly twenty years and of economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations (UN) has reduced Iraq's capacity to provide and maintain adequate services for its people.

Sanctions, imposed in 1990 following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August of that year, continue to have a serious effect on the economic well-being and health conditions of the population at all levels, throughout the country. Health services in particular have been severely compromised, with primary health care centres and hospitals falling into disrepair, a reduced and unsafe water supply and a serious deterioration in general standards of health and hygiene. As a result of increasing poverty many people, particularly children, are suffering from malnutrition.

The main affected area today is central and southern Iraq. The three northern governorates (out of a total of eighteen) have received increasing assistance, in particular during the last year. The estimated numbers affected represent some 80 % of the population (1999: 24,220,505).

Although there is increasing pressure from various countries to lift the sanctions against Iraq, it seems unlikely that this will happen soon. The UN Security Council passed resolution 1284, which promises a "suspension" of sanctions if Iraq co-operates with a reconstituted weapons inspection agency. However, the resolution was sufficiently ambiguous to prompt France, Russia and China to abstain. Iraq condemned the resolution. Negotiations if they were to take place this year, would be a long process and even if agreement were reached, the implementation and the impact of the resolution would not be felt for some considerable time.

The Security Council Resolution SCR 986, embodying the “Oil-For-Food Programme”, allows Iraq to sell petroleum on the international market, and to use the revenues (5.2 billion USD) for purchasing humanitarian supplies. However, its effect is muted by the delays by the sanctions committee in approving goods to be purchased, and the slowness of the internal distribution mechanisms.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) is the only domestic humanitarian organisation covering the entire country. It has been appointed by the government as co-ordinator of all NGOs in Iraq, and is currently implementing projects for some of these agencies.

Latest events

Regular encounters between Iraqi air defences and American and British planes continued in the first quarter of 2000: ten people were wounded in air raids on Southern Iraq in March. The attacks are the result of the impasse between Iraq and the UN on the issue of monitoring the elimination of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

In February 2000, the Humanitarian Co-ordinator of UNOCHI, Mr. Hans von Sponeck, resigned after publicly criticising the Oil-For-Food Programme. He contended that the Programme is affecting the wrong people and gave as an example that before sanctions the infant mortality rate in Iraq was 56 per 1,000 and today is 131/1000.

After a year of the worst drought in over 30 years, long awaited rain fell all over the country in December and January, considerably improving conditions in the agricultural sector.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The Federation has completed most of the programme activities foreseen for the first quarter of 2000: finalising the rehabilitation of 12 primary health care centres, health and nutrition information and education campaigns, the distribution of medical kits to 21 major hospitals, and CBFA activities.

Besides assisting other humanitarian organisations in the Centre and South of Iraq, IRCS has been closely involved in activities in the autonomous Northern (Kurdish) provinces in co-operation with the UN agencies based in the North. These activities consisted principally in assisting thousands of internally displaced people and returnees with winter relief supplies.

In the first quarter of 2000, the Federation and IRCS undertook the following programmes:

Medical assistance and rehabilitation

The medical assistance programme began in 1997 and will come to an end in June 2000. This programme comprises the following components:

Structural rehabilitation of 12 primary health care (PHC) centres

At the end of March the last PHC centre (in Sinjar/Ninevah) was officially handed over. Nearly all rehabilitation activities have been completed. A list of lessons learnt will further improve planning and implementation of new rehabilitation activities.

Health & Nutrition Information Dissemination (H&NID)

In 2000, a total of 72 IRCS volunteers in 18 Governorates have continued conducting four dissemination sessions each month, two within city boundaries and two in rural areas. These sessions encourage good hygiene and nutrition habits and take place mainly in schools and primary health care centres. The dissemination activities have been prepared and implemented in close co-operation with the Ministry of Health and UNICEF. All volunteers were already trained in community based first aid, which included basic health information and important nutrition issues. Between 1 January and 31 March, the volunteers have been in contact with more than 30,000 persons in the community. A refresher/review workshop for branch co-ordinators of these activities was held at the Federation Delegation office in early March.

In order to further strengthen the capacity of the National Society for increasing community awareness of important health, nutrition and safety issues, the current H&NID activities will be integrated into the Community Based First Aid activities, starting in mid April.

Procurement and distribution of medical kits and furniture to 72 primary health care centres

A total of 72 PHC centres will be supplied with one Epidemic Kit and two New Emergency Health Kits. These medical kits, plus 144 First Aid bags for the CBFA volunteers involved in the H&NID activities in their homes, arrived in Iraq in March. The medicines will be kept in the Federation warehouse until they have passed the in-country tests. Distribution of the medical kits to the PHCs will be effected in May.

The order for local production of furniture for the PHC centres has been placed and production and delivery to the 72 centres is scheduled for April and May.

Community Based First Aid (CBFA)

The IRCS aim is to have one CBFA trained volunteer in every household in Iraq. In the first quarter of 2000, 16 workshops for new volunteers took place with 20 participants in each course, bringing the total number of CBFA trained volunteers to 1,320 at the end of March.. (*This is more than 20% of the total number of volunteers*). In addition, two workshops for CBFA trainers took place, involving 34 trainers.

Thanks to a substantial contribution at the end of 1999, 58 more workshops can be planned for the rest of 2000. As mentioned earlier, the CBFA and H&NID activities will be integrated as of mid April 2000.

Medical kits

Since 1994, the IRCS/Federation has supplied basic medical kits to 21 hospitals throughout the country. In the beginning of 2000, the hospitals received the last supply of basic disposable and cost effective drug kits, financed through the Netherlands Red Cross and the Netherlands Government. In view of the improved availability of basic medicines in hospitals due to the Oil-for-Food Programme, it was decided to discontinue this programme for the time being. However, the IRCS/ Federation identified a shortage of medicines for the treatment of chronic diseases at hospital level and asked the Ministry of Health to prepare a detailed list of the most needed medicines, for inclusion in a follow-up programme.

Mosul Intravenous (IV) fluid plant

The IV fluid plant is the country's only plant of its kind and has the capacity to cover more than 40% of the needs. In 1999, the plant produced more than 1.5 million 500ml/IV fluid bags from the raw materials and spare parts received through IRCS/Federation, covering an estimated 20% of the country's needs. The last delivery of spare parts and raw materials took place in the beginning of 1999. In the course of the year, the breakdown of an important spare part prevented the factory from maintaining its planned daily production level of 12,000 bags. The Netherlands Red Cross presented a request to ECHO for the continuation of support to the factory. A decision is expected at the end of April.

New Strategic Approach •

In the first quarter of this year, taking into account the complex humanitarian situation and the increasing IRCS potential, the IRCS and the Federation have developed a more strategic approach to addressing the multiple needs of the population in the fields of health, rehabilitation, relief and development.

This strategy, which has a three to five year perspective and draws on discussions with different partners (ICRC, UN and government ministries), reflects Strategy 2010 and is fully in accordance with the recommendations of the assessment mission which took place in November and December 1999. It will be implemented, monitored and evaluated with the IRCS and the relevant government authorities.

The main elements are as follows:

Relief

The Federation will continue and increase its relief operation through the following activities:

- wWinter assistance to IDPs
- wMedicine (specialised cancer and heart diseases medicines)
- wWater and sanitation (in 21 already identified and assessed hospitals)
- wGeneral food programme.

Rehabilitation

The Federation will continue and increase its rehabilitation activities. These include the following:

- wPHC centre rehabilitation (12 centres already finished, 22 identified and started up, another 72 to be identified)
- wRehabilitation of IV Fluid plant factory (assessed and ready to be started up)
- wRehabilitation of medical gauze plant factory (assessed and ready to be started up)
- wRehabilitation of 21 hospitals (already identified)
- wWater/sanitation programme (21 hospitals identified/assessment mission required).

Development

The Federation will continue the following activities:

- wCapacity building of IRCS
- wCBFA/H&NID activities
- wDisaster Preparedness Programme (DPP).

Details of all the above activities are still being worked out. Finalised plans will be presented in a forthcoming Situation Report. In the meantime, National Societies interested in providing support should contact the Middle East and North Africa Department.

Outstanding needs

Although several donors have expressed interest in supporting this appeal, and some soft pledges have been made, no hard pledges or contributions have been received to date. Funds are therefore urgently needed, both to ensure continuity for programmes presented in Appeal 2000/2001 and to support the expanded new strategy described above.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Negotiations with the Government to obtain a 'Status Agreement' are continuing. Regular meetings between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, IRCS and Federation have taken place during the first quarter of 2000. The Federation's plans to considerably enlarge its Iraq operation make a Status Agreement increasingly imperative.

The Federation Delegation in Baghdad and the IRCS participated in regular meetings with UN agencies, the ICRC and NGOs working in Iraq. Information was shared about the humanitarian situation and ongoing activities. Co-operation and co-ordination with the ICRC have been further improved and enhanced. Working relations with government Ministries, especially the Ministry of Health, remained satisfactory during the implementation and co-ordination of current programs.

The Head of Delegation met twice with outgoing UNOCHI Co-ordinator Hans Von Sponeek. Other meetings, largely focused on the humanitarian situation and sanctions took place with visiting politicians, diplomats in country, including the Polish Ambassador, who is also the Chief of the US Interests Section, and visiting journalists.

Relations and co-operation with ICRC are satisfactory, with weekly meetings taking place.

Contributions

See "Outstanding Needs".

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