

SEASONAL CLIMATIC CHANGES IN ASIA & PACIFIC RAPID EMERGENCY RESPONSE

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The seasonal climatic changes in most regions of Asia and the Pacific are now predictable annual disaster events. They are expected to be particularly severe in 1998 due to a variety of factors: an anticipated severe El Niño Southern Oscillation phenomenon, environmental degradation, deforestation with archaic forest cutting practices and poor water management. These factors contribute to a situation where more people are vulnerable in the densely populated areas of this part of the world.

The monsoon rains which define the seasons in the region have their strongest effects in east and south east Asia, but also cause havoc in parts of south Asia and the Pacific. The floods they cause often have large-scale devastating effect on populations of the affected regions, result in heavy losses of crops, livestock and infrastructure, and in the worst cases, loss of life. The seasonal changes, however, alternate with dry weather periods, which can also have devastating effects on agriculture and food production in particular.

Adverse climatic changes tend to increase the number and severity of tropical storms in the Pacific Ocean, thus further exacerbating the devastation usually brought on by the annual storm season.

El Niño was already magnifying the effects of these seasonal changes in 1997, when it contributed to sustaining disastrous fires in parts of Indonesia and Malaysia from August to October.

Climatic variability also has an underestimated yet profound effect on factors influencing human health, such as the distribution and quality of surface water (resulting in increases in waterborne diseases such as hepatitis, shigellosis, typhoid, cholera), life-cycles of disease vectors (giving rise to the occurrence of malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever, encephalitis), and the ecosystem dynamics of predatory/prey relationships (e.g. affecting pests, rodents, insects, fungi, etc.).

To enable National Societies to respond to the expected seasonal weather emergencies in 1998, the Federation will continue to reinforce disaster preparedness measures in the region as a logical development of the Monsoon Appeal included in the Emergency Appeal 1997. Action, however, is being widened to cover more aspects of combating seasonal weather effects on vulnerable populations, and to include in a more consistent way general disaster preparedness measures in all sectors of the Asia & Pacific Region.

The programme builds on decisions to create or develop the Relief Network systems of the National Societies (NSs), taken at their forum in Tokyo in late 1996. It focuses primarily on reinforcing the NSs' capacities to support each other and utilising their respective expertise in responding to the seasonal disasters. It also seeks to strengthen the logistics capacities of NSs and Federation Regional Delegations, by improving communications networks and protocols and mechanisms for sharing and disseminating information, and by expanding mobile electronic reporting systems.

In China, half the population of 1.2 billion people lives in the flood plains drained by seven major river systems. An average of 10% is affected by floods every year, while typhoons regularly batter the east coastal belt.

In the Philippines, an average of 18 typhoons strike every year, bringing structural damage, landslides and floods.

In Indonesia and Malaysia in 1997 an unprecedented dry spell combined with forest fires resulted in smoke ('haze') pollution posing an important health hazard to millions of people for months on end. In Papua New Guinea, the same dry spell produced a critical shortage of water and famine conditions, which necessitated an international relief operation.

In DPR Korea, still attempting to recover from devastating floods in 1995 and 1996, unusual dry weather conditions, also attributed to an El Niño effect, seriously damaged crops in June, 1997, effects exacerbated by a tidal surge following a typhoon in August.

In Vietnam, floods in the densely populated Mekong delta and typhoons on the long eastern coastline are annual occurrences. The Mekong River floods the alluvial plains of Laos and Cambodia, where substantial deforestation in recent years aggravates the effects.

In South Asia, Bangladesh and India face increasing annual threats from floods in highly populated areas, as well as vicious cyclones that precipitate flooding in the low lying areas along the coastal belt. Millions of people lose their homes every year to the flood waters.

Flooding has increased in recent years in Pakistan. In Nepal, floods and landslides caused by heavy rain are an annual event.

On Manihiki in the Northern Cook Islands, nearly all housing was destroyed and several people died in a storm surge resulting from the unusually early Tropical Cyclone 'Martin'.

Objectives in 1998

- w** To increase the rapidity and efficiency of National Societies' response to disaster situations occurring as a result of cyclical climatic changes in the region;
- w** to reinforce the NSs' 'Relief Network' in the region;
- w** to reinforce the co-ordination and support mechanisms of the Regional Delegations;
- w** to promote greater regional and international awareness of the predictability of seasonal disasters and the serious human problems they cause and publicise the need for preparedness.

Plan of Action

The Federation Secretariat will provide overall co-ordination of this programme. The main co-ordination mechanism will be the Federation Regional Delegations for the Pacific (Sydney/Suva), South East Asia (Kuala Lumpur) and South Asia (New Delhi). They, and in particular their Disaster Preparedness Delegates, will provide the focal point for the co-ordination of various activities.

The main thrust will be on the timely and accurate assessment of needs and the setting up of operations. Particular emphasis will be made on identification of specialised expertise in the National Societies, the pulling together of implementation protocols (e.g. for Assessment Teams at the onset of a disaster, information/communications systems) and the training of these teams.

Special studies will be undertaken on logistics and market opportunities for procurement and transportation of relief goods in the Region, as well as on the utilisation of the access of the National Societies to these markets.

Studies on the expansion of the telecommunication networks and protocols will be initiated, using the resources of the Secretariat Telecom Department. Regional Delegations in particular will be equipped with mobile communications equipment for use by assessment teams at the onset of disaster situations and for electronic reporting for media purposes.

A register of resources and activities, including trained personnel of the National Societies, and relief goods suppliers, will be kept in the local data bases to facilitate more immediate and effective co-ordination of regional response to cyclical disasters.