

CROATIA: ASSISTANCE TO REFUGEES, DISPLACED PERSONS AND RETURNEES

18 February 1999

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period covered: November-December 1998

After six years of International Federation support to the Croatian Red Cross (CRC), the end of 1998 saw the final stages in the transfer of operational and managerial responsibility for remaining programmes to the CRC and the closure of the Federation's country delegation at the end of December. In this respect, one of the main objectives of the Appeal has been fully met. The Federation's decision to close its delegation in Croatia is a reflection of the strength of the Croatian Red Cross and its ability to meet the new challenges in the country. However, it will be imperative over the next few years that further support is extended to the Croatian Red Cross, both through the Federation's regional delegation in Budapest and via bilateral agreements with other National Societies, in identifying and ensuring financial continuity and the self-sustainability of its programmes.

The context

As a result of the conflict in Croatia in 1991 and the ongoing internal tensions which lasted through mid-1995, almost one million people found themselves displaced and homeless. The situation was compounded by the influx of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina which peaked in late 1992. In order to facilitate the humanitarian response of an overburdened Croatian Red Cross, the International Federation established a delegation in August 1992 to assist with the National Society's relief programme for refugees, displaced persons and, subsequently, for returnees.

Latest events

The final months of 1998 witnessed a number of initiatives related to the return process, which has proceeded relatively slowly to date. In December, the first organised return from Republika Srpska to Croatia took place, with some 30 people returning to the county of Sisak-Moslavina. While some people were able to return directly to their houses, others will be staying with relatives or friends until their houses have been repaired. December also saw the first returnee conference in Vukovar with the discussion focusing on de-mining, infrastructure problems, the economic situation (encompassing agriculture and small private business), and the reconstruction of family homes.

During November, several regions in Croatia were hit by flooding (areas around the Kupa, Sutla, Bednja and Plitvica rivers and their tributaries), resulting in damage to roads and houses and the death of livestock.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Home Support Service •

The home support service provides relief, psycho-social, technical, and medical assistance to vulnerable groups. The service in Eastern Slavonia remained stable at the end of the year in terms of the number of beneficiaries served, visits made, and the volunteers involved in the programme. One new location opened in Baranja/Darda during November. In Western Slavonia the programme continued to expand during the last two months of 1998, with increases in the numbers of volunteers involved and beneficiaries covered.

A joint training opportunity was held in December for home care programme volunteers, co-ordinators, and branch secretaries from Eastern and Western Slavonia. The workshop focused on a basic introduction to the work of the Movement, as well as more home care-specific training elements. Home care volunteers were also involved in a firewood distribution programme for 250 home care beneficiaries in December. A total of 250 firewood units were distributed by truck in four weeks. This distribution addressed a need revealed during a beneficiary status questionnaire process carried out during the autumn. All home care programme volunteers were also due to receive a pair of shoes and socks at the end of the year to address basic needs.

Efforts also continued throughout the reporting period in Eastern and Western Slavonia to secure funding for the programme in 1999. Discussions were held at both headquarters and branch level with the government, local municipalities and social welfare offices to receive financial support on the basis of per beneficiary fees for the provision of home care services to the vulnerable. Thanks to good relations with the local social welfare centres and town authorities it appears that most branches were able to continue the programme as planned in 1999.

Home Care Beneficiary Figures (November – December 1998)

	November		December	
	Benefs	Visits	Benefs	Visits
<i>Eastern Slavonia</i>				
Beli Manastir	162	1,050	162	1,025
Ilok	40	344	40	315
Valpovo	150	1,020	150	1,015
Vinkovci	150	1,000	150	1,005
Vukovar	355	2,905	351	2,840
Zupanja	170	1,100	170	1,005
Total	1,027	7,419	1,023	7,205
<i>Western Slavonia</i>				
Daruvar	113	572	114	614
Djakovo (Gasinci)	142	3,989	138	3,782

Nova Gradiska	162	1,552	162	1,390
Pakrac	44	503	46	473
Slavonski Brod	149	1,198	149	1,230
Total	650	8,091	649	7,774

Relief : Direct Food Support •

Despite the fact that the end of 1998 saw the final stages in the transfer of operational and managerial responsibility for remaining programmes to the CRC and the closure of the Federation's country delegation at the end of December, a Federation presence will be maintained during the first half of 1999 by the Regional Logistics Centre in Zagreb, primarily to oversee the final months of the ECHO-funded direct food aid programme. The impact of an importation ban on wheat flour imposed by the Croatian government in mid-1998 continued to cause concern for this ECHO-funded programme at the end of the year, despite the lifting of the ban in October. Although a small 'buffer' stock was able to limit the impact on beneficiaries early on, when the ban was finally lifted in October, macro and micro distribution faced major delays. Efforts to reposition existing stocks were compounded by the discovery of an infested warehouse. However by December, new plans had been prepared to increase the Croatian Red Cross transportation capacity to complete the macro distribution of phase IV of the contract.

A series of training sessions for Red Cross branch secretaries and volunteers involved in the programme began in November, focusing on the beneficiary registration system, warehousing practices, relief supply distribution system and reporting procedures. Discussions are still continuing with ECHO concerning the future of the programme beyond March 1999 but it seems likely that the Danish Red Cross will take over the management of the ECHO contract with the CRC for what is believed to be the final six-month extension.

Eastern Slavonia Branch Support •

As part of the integration of former local Red Cross structures and staff into the Croatian Red Cross's new structure for the region introduced at the beginning of 1998, financial support from the Swiss and Austrian Red Cross Societies enabled the Federation to continue to provide salary support until the end of the year to 19 Red Cross staff in Eastern Slavonia.

Institutional Elderly Care •

Following confirmation of funding from the Norwegian Red Cross in October, work on completion of the second and final phase of the construction of a new elderly care village in Ilok, Eastern Slavonia, continued during the reporting period. By the end of the year, a total of 43 living units were in place around the central facility, using Danish Red Cross prefabricated houses from one of the transition camps in Kutina. Outfitting of the units and final structural work is expected to be completed by the end of February 1999.

Outstanding needs

Thanks to key contributions in the middle of the year, the transfer of operational and managerial responsibility for remaining programmes to the Croatian Red Cross was successfully completed by the end of the year, ahead of the closure of the Federation's delegation in Croatia on 31 December. Further support to the Croatian Red Cross will be provided in 1999 from the Federation's regional delegation in Budapest, focusing on communications, youth, institutional and resource development issues.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The end of 1998 and the first quarter of 1999 marks an important and successful transition of full operational management authority and responsibility from the International Federation to the Croatian Red Cross (thereby satisfying one of the main objectives of the Appeal). It signifies the confidence of the Federation in the National Society, which was recognised by the ICRC and accepted into the Federation a year after an International Federation Delegation was first opened in Croatia. The Federation will continue to work with the CRC through the Regional Delegation in Budapest and the assistance of sister National Societies to support the CRC in meeting the many challenges which still lie ahead.

The Federation would like to thank those Donors and National Societies who have contributed over the last six years to making the Red Cross's humanitarian action in Croatia a substantial success.

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