

SOUTH EAST ASIA: REGIONAL PROGRAMMES

1 March, 2000

Special report on institutional development in Myanmar

appeal no. 01.31/99

situation report no. 4

period covered: 1 July - 31 December 1999

The National Society's Institutional Development has made slow progress; proposals to give a new dynamic to the process are expected from a recently completed external review. Disaster Preparedness and first aid programmes are being restructured, while the HIV/AIDS programme for young people is growing.

The context

The political situation at home and abroad for the Union of Myanmar changed little in the latter half of 1999. However, for the first time in 15 years, the head of Myanmar's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), General Than Shwe, met officially with the Prime Minister of Japan. This meeting was followed by meetings with the President of the Republic of Korea and the Premier of China at an informal Asian Summit in Manila in November 1999. This event has been viewed as a "constructive engagement" by Asian countries to dispel the political stagnation surrounding Myanmar's diplomatic relations.

The European Union's economic sanctions against Myanmar were extended in October for six months, rather than the one-year extension imposed previously. The US government extended its economic sanctions for another year in May. The UN special envoy, Alvar De Soto, made his fourth visit to Myanmar, along with representatives of the World Bank, as part of continued efforts to discuss national reconciliation and the restoration of democracy with the government and the political opposition.

Life expectancy at birth in Myanmar is 60, infant mortality 79 per 1,000 live births, child malnutrition 43% of children under five. 60% of the population have access to safe drinking water, and 45% have access to safe and convenient excreta disposal. These numbers are lower than in other East Asia and Pacific countries.

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Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) has continued to play an active role in the international Red Cross community, using opportunities for interaction available through the Myanmar Delegation and the Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur (RDKL). During the reporting period National Society officials participated in various regional meetings, among them the 5th Conference of Leaders of ASEAN Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies in Kuala Lumpur in September.

For the first time, MRCS hosted the annual Asian First Aid in the Community Workshop, held from 6 to 10 December in Yangon, Myanmar. It had as its main agenda item the monitoring and evaluation of First Aid Programmes. Among the 26 National Societies invited were the 10 ASEAN countries, other East and South Asian countries and some Participating National Societies. Also invited were the Myanmar minister of health (a speaker at the opening ceremony), the ministers of home affairs and relief and welfare and members of the diplomatic community. It proved to be an excellent opportunity for MRCS to raise its profile at home and abroad, and particularly as a humanitarian organisation with a nation-wide grassroots volunteer network.

CBFA Training •

Several CBFA training courses took place in the States and Divisions during the first half of 1999. The second round, which was to be held in the second half of the year, was postponed due to budget constraints and limited human resources, and in view of the expectations of the 4th Asian First Aid in the Community Workshop, which requires ongoing CBFA training programmes to have closer links to core programmes (i.e. health, DP) than before. The current plan is for the MRCS to conduct a review and needs assessment for a new Community Health Programme with a water/sanitation component in consultation/cooperation with RDKL in early March, 2000. The ongoing CBFA training programme as well as the community based DP programme will be integrated into this process.

Institutional Development •

Computer skills and English language training has been implemented, targeting headquarters staff. The computer skills training course was held 1 September to 1 November (three times a week) for 10 participants (4 male, 6 female). The Basic English Language training course was held over the same period, also three times a week, for 11 participants (5 male, 6 female).

MRCS is now in the process of strategic planning to restructure and develop its organisation and programmes, following the results of a governance, management and institutional development workshop held in March 1999. In the latter half of 1999, preparations were made for a review that will assist MRCS to develop priorities and a Plan of Action for external assistance. The review was scheduled to take place 9-22 January, 2000, in consultation with the Myanmar Delegation, RDKL and the Secretariat, Geneva. It is being funded by the Japanese Red Cross Society.

Disaster Preparedness (DP) and Response •

MRCS recognises the shortfalls of its current DP programme, both the financial constraints and the problems related to strategy and programme contents, such as strategic vision, objectives, targets, methodology and output. The Society will conduct a review and needs assessment in order to draw up its own disaster policy and strategy, and introduce a new community based disaster preparedness (CBDP) programme in 2000. Its participation in the Disaster Management Workshop in Manila gave promising signals on future co-operation with ASEAN National Societies and the exchange of expertise and experience. The workshop visibly benefited the planning process of the MRCS's CBDP.

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MRCS/UNHCR Integrated Assistance Programme for the Vulnerable Returnee Communities in Northern Rakhine State •

Following a major exodus of some 250,000 people from Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State into Bangladesh in 1991 and 1992, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) played a leading role in facilitating their voluntary repatriation. To date some 230,000 refugees have been repatriated to their home villages. (Among those remaining, 7,000 have been given clearance for repatriation.)

As the repatriation took place, UNHCR identified some 10,000 people among the returnees, as well as the same number in the local population, as Extremely Vulnerable Individuals (EVI), and requested MRCS to take care of them, leading to the creation of the Integrated Assistance Programme for Vulnerable Returnee Communities in Northern Rakhine State. Beneficiaries include female heads of household, orphans, destitute elderly, and physically or mentally handicapped. All costs are funded by UNHCR.

The MRCS programme provides repatriation assistance and emergency assistance, but its main focus is on income generation support, to encourage self reliance. Since 1996 to the end of 1999, to support animal husbandry, 4,285 beneficiaries have received a female goat, 1,987 families have received chickens and 450 families have been given fishing nets and gear. Another 5,594 have been helped to cultivate vegetable gardens, 1,615 were trained in basketry and 334 in sewing skills, while 400 would-be entrepreneurs got cash assistance to open their own shop.

Although most of the refugees had returned by July 1997, returns resumed in November 1998. MRCS assisted the returnees with registration, gave them a food ration and accompanied them to their home villages. Up to 50 people a week have been helped in this way. The Society has also assisted more than 140 people with cash support in cases of floods, fires, food shortages and severe illness.

A review of the beneficiaries list in 1999 brought numbers down from 22,424 to some 8,000. In 2000, MRCS will complete providing income generating tools or skills to this reduced list; it will also shift the emphasis of its activities to community development. Preparations for this change began in October when programme staff were given a three day course in community based first aid.

The year 2000 will be the final year of this joint operation, which in 1999 was in its fourth year. UNHCR will phase-out its involvement by 2001, when programmes in Rakhine will be replaced by a new development oriented plan, currently being prepared by UN agencies and partners. The MRCS is discussing its continuing involvement in this new development phase.

MRCS/UNICEF HIV/AIDS Peer Health Education Programme •

Under the National AIDS Programme umbrella, MRCS has been implementing Youth Peer Education and HIV/AIDS Prevention with the support of UNICEF since 1994. MRCS has organised training for core trainers and facilitators, using a training manual which focuses on life skills, decision-making, reproductive health, HIV/STDs and other issues that are crucial to young people.

MRCS and UNICEF jointly organised a Review Workshop on HIV/AIDS Youth Peer Education Training Activities on 9 August 1999. A total of 45 participants attended, including three Central Executive Committee members responsible for HIV/AIDS training, ten core trainers and 31 township HIV/AIDS co-ordinators from 14 States and Divisions. They discussed sharing experience among township co-ordinators, improving the training process, materials and methodology and ensuring the effective planning of MRCS's peer education training for 1999-2000. After the workshop, a working committee for the review and modification of the training manual was formed. The draft revised manual was submitted to UNICEF in early November for suggestions and comments.

For World AIDS Day, MRCS organised a mini-exhibition on HIV/AIDS in its HQ building. Group discussions on HIV/AIDS were conducted for middle and high school students in Yangon and Dawei (Tanintharyi Division), Maubin (Ayeyarwady Division), Magway (Magway Division) and Lashio

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(Northern Shan State). Over 2,400 students in Yangon and 2,000 students from the townships in these three Divisions and one State were reached through this initiative.

MRCS is now preparing a medium-term plan on HIV/AIDS for 2000-2002, which includes restructuring the HIV/AIDS unit, establishment of youth-friendly centres in two pilot townships, and care and counselling training for Red Cross and community volunteers in three pilot townships. In addition, life skills training will be expanded to Yangon and Tanintharyi Divisions (23 townships) and training of youth will be continued in 21 townships within Mon, Kayin and Rakhine States.

MRCS also intends to explore ways of supporting people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS by forming community-based AIDS Action Groups and to conduct STD/HIV behavioural studies among young people in the next three years.

Other Activities •

A safe drinking water project (installation of shallow tube well) funded by the Korean (Rep.) Red Cross Society has not yet been completed. This Society's support for the development of three MRCS branches, implemented over the past five years, is continuing.

Cool rooms for blood storage are in the process of being installed in Yangon and Mandalay.

The nation-wide immunisation campaign jointly organised by UNICEF and the government this year was successfully carried out in co-operation with MRCS's volunteers.

Outstanding needs

In 1999, the Red Cross Societies of Japan, China and the Republic of Korea contributed to the cost of Federation supported programmes such as ID, CBFA training and branch development. Programme expenditures were kept to a minimum due to very limited funding, as well as lack of a long-term programme strategy of MRCS.

Given the change of leadership within MRCS and its challenge to restructure its institutions and programmes, the Federation requires further support, ranging from funding to technical expertise and human resources, to assist MRCS during this dynamic period of change. The year 2000 will be crucial for MRCS in this regard. The following activities will be, or have been, implemented in the first half of 2000:

- ✓ a review for assisting MRCS to develop priorities and a Plan of Action for external assistance (January 2000);
- ✓ a needs assessment for CBDP and CBHP with Wat/San and a strategic Plan of Action workshop.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The Federation Delegation in Myanmar regularly co-ordinates with the ICRC Delegation in Yangon, plus UN agencies and NGOs. Joint programmes were implemented with UNHCR and in co-operation with the Federation. Information sharing and monitoring initiatives take place regularly at both the field and HQ level.

The changes within MRCS have gradually attracted the attention of the government and aid agencies. The 4th Asian First Aid in the Community Workshop gave both MRCS and the Federation an excellent opportunity for further advocacy vis-à-vis the government and diplomatic community in Yangon. The future funding situation will depend, at least partly, on the success of the MRCS and the Federation in building close relationships/linkage with key embassies and other donor agencies.

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