

# ***COLOMBIA: FLOODS***

*22nd May 2000*

## ***Information Bulletin N° 3***

### ***The Disaster***

More than half of Colombia, or 22 of its 31 departments, has been seriously affected by floods, landslides, avalanches and heavy seas due to torrential rains on and off since October last year. The rains have been caused by the Pacific Cold Phenomenon, or *La Niña*. In addition, Hurricane Lenny hit Colombia's Atlantic coast, causing damage in three departments. According to the Civil Defence this is the worst flooding in Colombia in the last 25 years.

An emergency was declared in five provinces: Cauca, Nariño, Huila, Putumayo and Valle, in the south west, in the Andean region and in the Atlantic area. The Government declared a Red Alert in the regions near the Cauca, Magdalena, Atrato, Patía and Sinú riverbanks.

Altogether, some 524 floods, 139 landslides, 28 avalanches and 6 ground swells affected 769 municipalities in 22 Departments. The departments of Caquetá, Chocó, Atlántico, Magdalena and La Guajira were the worst hit: 59.830 families, or 500,000 individuals, were affected.

In March the rains abated, but the respite was shortlived. On 25 March they returned: five persons died, 20 were injured and 600 families in the province of Santander were evacuated because of landslides.

The rains lessened again in April. However, in the province of Cauca in the south, they had had a serious effect on a geological displacement in the Colombian mountain range, known as "el Macizo Colombiano". 6,1966 homes were reported affected by the fissure. Two villages completely disappeared in less than three months. Twenty other municipalities risk the same fate.

On 5 May the rains started again, causing disasters in western Colombia. On 14 May in Medellin, the provincial capital of Antioquia, a landslide killed a family of eight. Authorities estimate that 56 shanty towns perched precariously on mountainsides around the capital are in the danger zone, threatening the lives of 23,000 persons .

In Nariño, the local government declared an emergency when the rivers Telembi, Maguí and Patía broke their banks. In the province of Chocó the main river, the Atrato, again caused flooding : 24, 852 persons are estimated to have been directly affected. The provinces of Cundinamarca, Tolima, Valle del Cauca and Amazonas have also suffered flooding and landslides.

According to the Meteorological Institute (IDEAM), heavy rains will continue until mid-June in the Andean and Caribbean regions of Colombia. They may also occur in other parts, as the present meteorological phenomenon is very unusual and unpredictable. The National Disaster System, of which the Colombian Red Cross forms part, has requested its committees to be on permanent alert.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent Action***

As an initial response to the emergency the Colombian Red Cross (CRC) mobilised over 5,000 volunteers from 22 Red Cross Department Branches and 60 Municipal Operative Units.

During the Red Alert, the National Society carried out an assessment in co-operation with local and regional Emergency Committees co-ordinated by the National Disaster System (*Sistema Nacional para la Prevención y Atención de Desastres*; SNPAD). The local committees participated in evacuating and temporarily relocating the people affected or at risk, and distributed relief items from the National Calamity Fund (*Fondo Nacional de Calamidades*; FNC). The CRC worked together with the Health Ministry in the areas affected by the rains, conducting Health Field Days and equipping health care centres.

During the emergency in the Caquetá, Chocó, Atlántico, Magdalena and La Guajira departments during the last three months of 1999, the CRC distributed food and non food relief items to 29,477 families or 170,164 persons in 18 municipalities.

Between 1 February and 8 March the CRC assisted 6,556 victims with various relief items, including 961 food parcels, 263 comfort kits, kitchen sets, sheets, mattresses and blankets. Volunteers evacuated and re-housed persons living in the danger zone and also retrieved ten drowned bodies.

During the most recent emergency Red Cross branches participated in search and rescue, deploying its teams with dogs, gave first aid, carried out a census and needs evaluation and distributed blankets, sheets and tarpaulins, kitchen and hygiene kits from own stock or that of the National Calamity Fund.

Red Cross trucks with relief items such as mattresses, sheets and blankets were sent on 18 May from Bogotá for Chocó and Cauca.

In addition to the Colombian Red Cross's own funds, the ICRC donated CHF 21,500 in kind. The following National Societies contributed to the operation with cash: Netherlands Red Cross, German Red Cross, American Red Cross, Spanish Red Cross/ECHO and Canadian Red Cross. The Colombian National Disaster System contributed CHF 35,200. The Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) of the International Federation contributed CHF 100,000.

## ***Needs***

Based on its assessment, the Colombian Red Cross will assist in the delivery of supplies to 19,000 beneficiaries or 3,932 families during a three month period in the following provinces : Antioquia (667 families), Cauca (640 families), Cesar (255 families), Huila (417 families), Nariño (740 families), Norte de Santander (204 families), Tolima (371 families), Valle de Cauca (638 families). The situation will constantly be monitored as the flooding is unpredictable.

The total cost of the operation is approximately CHF 500,000. As a result of Information Bulletin no 1, the Norwegian Red Cross has pledged CHF 80,000, the Canadian Red Cross CHF 40,000 and the Netherlands Red Cross CHF 73,000.

With DREF funding, the Colombian Red Cross has purchased mattresses, sheets and blankets, plates and cooking sets, and protective equipment for the volunteers working in the operation, as well as basic radio equipment for its Municipal Units in the provinces mentioned above.

The National Society would welcome additional support from sister societies to enable it to carry out the operation as planned. It also needs to replenish its warehouses, in order to be ready for the next disaster.

***Plan of action***

The Colombian RC will assist the 19,000 affected families as follows:

- food assistance: two food packages for each family;
- non food assistance: kitchen, clothing and cleaning products kits, mattresses, sheets and blankets for each family;
- health and basic sanitation: health field days, safe drinking water, and medication.
  
- If sufficient funding were to be made available, the Society would provide rehabilitation support.

The operation will be monitored and, when finished, evaluated by the National Society.

The Colombian Red Cross has 54,000 active volunteers and 2,450 employees in 31 Red Cross Branches, with 232 Municipal Operative Units and Support Groups. Its operations, although decentralised, are controlled and co-ordinated by its National Operations and Relief Office.

Peter Rees-Gildea  
Director  
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Santiago Gil  
Director  
Americas Department

**This and other reports on Federation operations are available on the Federation's website: <http://www.ifrc.org>**