

INFORMATION BULLETIN



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

CENTRAL EUROPE: FLOODS

14 August, 2002

Information Bulletin N° 03/2002

Disastr relief Emergency Fund (DREF) Allocated: None

In what is being described as “the Floods of the Century” in Central Europe, homes have been destroyed, schools, health centres and businesses have been damaged, farmland and crops lie in ruins, and infrastructure and services are severely disrupted. As the world’s attention focused on Prague, gripped by its worst flood in more than a century, the threat of flood surges indicated an ever-widening disaster across the region, prompting more evacuations. Red Cross National Societies have been active in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia in responding in search and rescue activities and to the immediate needs.

The Situation

As heavy rains continued throughout much of Central Europe, initial hopes that water levels would begin to recede quickly began to fade. The morning of 13 August brought the grim but expected news of massive flood damage and a heightened state of emergency across much of the region. Up to 50,000 people were expected to be evacuated from the Czech capital, Prague. Meanwhile, in Austria the authorities and some 2,000 Red Cross volunteers were assisting with the search and relief operation. In Germany, several cities were partially submerged, with no sign of a letup of the inundation in sight. Bulgaria and Hungary also indicated flooding had taken place. The situation in Romania seems to be deteriorating, with renewed reports of flooding and tornados. With the current forecast indicating more rain and thunderstorms for the next few days, the level of concern remains understandably high. Accurately predicting the crest of rivers has proven to be just about impossible, with each forecast time missed. There is currently some optimism, as the large weather front responsible for the rains seems to be finally dissipating.



While much of the world’s attention was captured by the dramatic scenes from Prague and Dresden, the situation in Romania remains a major concern. Due to the remoteness of the affected areas, the full impact of the disaster has yet to be completely assessed. However, initial reports indicate that complete livelihoods have already been lost for many, and that already difficult living conditions have now been made unbearable. There is a strong likelihood that specific Red Cross humanitarian assistance may be requested for Romania.

The region remains under the storm clouds, with the brunt of the rains now more concentrated over the eastern sections of Central Europe. The situation continues to be closely monitored by the National Societies concerned.

The sheer scale of this disaster indicates that long after the flood waters have fully receded, clean up work, repairs and restoration will continue for an extended period. It will be important to assess whether assistance will be required in these efforts.

Additional country specific information is also available on the International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies web site, under the Disaster Management Information Service (DMIS) section: www.ifrc.org/dmis

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Red Cross is once again playing a key role in assisting those affected by the floods. Across the region, National Societies have mobilized in various ways, ranging from rescue work to the provision of hot meals, and from disinfecting buildings to distributing hygiene parcels. Reports of good co-operation between National Societies are also very heartening. Co-operation with the various authorities involved in rescue and relief operations has also been excellent. Various Red Cross National Societies have distributed both their own disaster preparedness stocks, and provided assistance with the distribution of the stocks of the authorities. The fast and efficient mobilization of volunteers has been an important factor in the rapid response demonstrated in this disaster. More volunteers have been offering their services as the disaster continues. Various Red Cross National Societies have been prominently featured on the major media networks with regards to their work during this crisis.



Media are being updated on the regional situation. Interviews are being directly facilitated with the Czech Red Cross in Prague. CNN conducted a live regional update with the Head of the Regional Communications Unit. BBC and Radio France International have also been contacted.

Austrian Red Cross:

Large areas of Austria have been particularly hard hit by the constant rains. The Austrian Red Cross has mobilized in a rapid and effective way, providing a full range of support and services, ranging from rescue work to food preparation and distribution, the establishment of temporary shelters and more. As many as 2000 Austrian Red Cross volunteers have been involved in the continuing operations, performing a wide range of tasks and services.

The Austrian Red Cross has extensive coverage of the floods and of the Red Cross response on their excellent web site: <http://www.rotekreuz.at>

Bulgarian Red Cross:

The Bulgarian Red Cross is ready to provide continued assistance should it be necessary. They have already distributed family packages and clothing to those affected. With the rains continuing, it is uncertain how the situation will develop.

Czech Red Cross:

As floods spread across Central Europe, the symbolic focal point of the disaster became the Czech capital, Prague. The entire world watched with anxiety as reports emerged that the historic Old Town of the city was about to be submerged by the rising waters of the Vltava river. The worst fears were realized when the river burst its banks, and seven out of ten of Prague's districts were ordered evacuated. Massive efforts are still underway to save historic buildings, monuments and other cultural treasures from the rising waters. Early predictions as to when the river would crest proved to be completely inaccurate, and at the time of writing the situation remains uncertain.

While the Czech capital has captured the bulk of the media attention, other areas of the country have also been affected. States of emergency were declared in Central and Southern Bohemia, and the Pilsen and Karlovy Vary regions. Some 50 000 Prague citizens are expected to be evacuated. While many citizens chose to ignore the initial evacuation orders, as night fell and the electricity supply faltered, an increasing amount of people chose to

leave their homes. There are renewed hopes that the worst has passed, and that the waters will now begin to recede. From the very beginning of the emergency the Czech Red Cross was involved in rescue efforts, as well as with the distribution of clean water and food.

German Red Cross:

The world's press have also been showing dramatic images from Germany, where several cities and towns have been inundated. Dresden has been particularly hard hit, with weather levels rising to over two meters high in parts of the city. Rail service, telephone service and public transportation has been stopped or severely disrupted. The Danube and Elbe Rivers are four times higher than usual, and several dams have broken.

The German Red Cross has sent water rescue teams to isolated areas, and are also helping with the emergency evacuation of the elderly and handicapped. The German Red Cross has also prepared emergency shelters, and mobile kitchens have been preparing and delivering meals and hot drinks to the various action teams involved in operations. Intervention teams have also been providing psychological support to those affected. For more information, including the latest news and photos, please visit the very informative German Red Cross web site: www.rotkreuz.de

Hungarian Red Cross:

The Hungarian Red Cross has been providing assistance to residents of Borsod county, in the north-east of the country. A normally small local stream surged and burst its banks, forcing residents to flee their homes. Hygiene parcels and have been distributed, and the situation continues to be monitored closely.

Romanian Red Cross:

The flooding situation in Romania began in July, and has only been exacerbated by this new series of storms. Storm clouds continue to linger over the country. During the night of August 12-13, very powerful tornados blew over five counties, leading to enormous material damage, as well as to three deaths. According to the latest forecasts, new tornados and strong storms are expected in about ten counties, which will increase the number of affected people. The Romanian Red Cross branches are co-operating with the Disaster Preparedness Commission in the affected counties to assess the needs for possible Red Cross action. Further assistance will be provided based on volunteer mobilization and stocks from local disaster preparedness warehouses.

The very first reports indicated two deaths as a result of the flooding, later rising to eight. As more information has become available, the broad scale of the disaster is more clear: almost one thousand destroyed or damaged households with three thousand damaged sheds and outbuildings, 55 damaged schools, kindergartens, bakeries and medical units, and some 15 000 affected people. More than 5000 hectares of arable land have also been destroyed, and roads, railways, power lines and hydroelectric equipment were damaged. The area of the flooding and damage has been widespread, affecting 170 locations in 24 counties (Alba, Brasov, Botosani, Constanta, Covasna, Cluj, Buzau, Mures, Gorj, Mehedinti, Ncamt, Olt, Prahova, Harghita, Telcorman, Vrancea, Sucenvan, Dolj, Giurgiu, Galati, Iasi and Vaslui).The situation does not appear to be improving, and more rain is on the way.

Red Cross action in Romania was swift. There has been co-operation with national authorities and local councils. Volunteers were quickly mobilized to support the distribution of relief items originating from national council relief warehouses. Supplies from Red Cross central and regional warehouses were also immediately dispatched to the affected areas. Over a period of more than ten days, assistance was provided over a wide area. The value of goods distributed is in the area of Euro 23 000. Romanian Red Cross assistance has included, among other things: provision of clothing items and footwear, mineral water, temporary shelter equipment, blankets, sleeping bags, basic food items and financial aid. Local Red Cross branches have been active, and have been raising support through local appeals.

Taking into account the large number of people affected, the Romanian Red Cross is planning an assessment and foresees a four month humanitarian assistance project to support with basic food and hygienic items. At the moment, Red Cross disaster preparedness stocks have been depleted, and it is crucial that these be replaced as soon as possible. An estimated Euro 300 000 will be needed for this ongoing operation. More information will be provided as it becomes available. It is important to note that countries bordering on Romania have also been suffering from massive flooding. Whether or not they will impact on Romania remains to be seen.

Slovak Red Cross:

The flooding in Slovakia is estimated to have caused damages in the range of 100 million SK (CHF 3.3 million). The Slovak Red Cross has been active in cleaning and disinfecting damaged properties. At the moment they have requested some CHF 5,000 in order to purchase additional cleaning and disinfecting supplies.

For a full description of National Society profiles, see www.ifrc.org

For further details please contact :

- *The Regional Delegation for Central Europe, Budapest, Mr. Pentti Kotoaro, Head of Regional Delegation, Phone 36 1 248 3301; fax 36 1 248 3322; email ifrchu01@ifrc.org*
- *Penny Elghady, Phone 41 22 730 4319; Fax 41 22 733 0395; email elghady@ifrc.org*

All International Federation Operations seek to adhere to the Code of Conduct and are committed to the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (SPHERE Project) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable.

For support to or for further information concerning Federation operations in this or other countries, please access the Federation website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

For longer-term programmes, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal.

John Horekens
Director
Division of External Relations

Lynette Lowndes
Head
Europe Department