

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

LESOTHO: FOOD INSECURITY

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Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) allocated: None

This Bulletin is being issued based on the needs described below reflecting the information available at this time. Based on further updates and details from assessment reports, or should the situation deteriorate, the Federation will consider international support through an Appeal.

The Situation

Lesotho, the small mountainous country located in southern Africa, has been severely hit by the dry spell that is currently affecting the whole southern Africa region. According to the FAO/WFP assessment report, 22% of the population (half a million people) are in need of food aid in the next 9-12 months to avert a humanitarian disaster. In response to this situation, the government of Lesotho declared a state of famine in April and requested FAO/WFP for assistance in assessing the food situation in the country.

Traditionally a food deficit production country, the food production situation has been further exacerbated by severe weather conditions such as heavy rains, hailstorms, frost and tornadoes. The heavy rainfalls have prevented the population from tilling the land and the few crops that survived were terminated by early frost. The FAO/WFP report estimates a food deficit of 338,000 tonnes out of the 412,000 tonnes needed to feed the population, leaving domestic cereal supply at only 74,000 tonnes.

Food shortages, however, are not the only problem that Lesotho struggles with. The country has a very high unemployment rate, unofficially estimated at 60%. Additionally, the country is dominated by a very poor infrastructure which means that many areas in the mountains are almost inaccessible, communication is a problem, health standards are poor, and there is very little arable land (10%) suitable for cultivation. Severe weather variability further aggravates the situation and leaves an already vulnerable population in a very precarious situation. Causes of the food insecurity situation are interlinked and need to be addressed in both the immediate and the longer term. Soil erosion, degradation, and declines in soil fertility are all serious threats to the agricultural output for future generations.

The population of Lesotho has very few alternatives to substitute for the shortage in cereals, and assistance is urgently needed to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Action

The Lesotho Red Cross Society (LRCS) has been monitoring the food insecurity situation in the country and has requested the assistance of the International Federation's regional office in Harare to conduct an assessment mission. The regional office responded by sending a regional disaster response team to Lesotho for a ten-day fact-finding assessment mission at the end of May. The team comprised national society staff from Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe as well as regional office staff. The objective of the mission was to develop an overview

of the situation and establish needs in order to identify the capacity of the Lesotho Red Cross and areas that the Society could assist in. The assessment was carried out in two of the most remote and inaccessible districts in the eastern part of the country: Qacha's nek and Thaba Tseka. The results of the mission will be considered with the LRCS, and a decision will be taken whether to integrate the assistance activities into the Federation's southern Africa food insecurity emergency appeal (no. 12/02).

The findings of the team included:

- ♦ The nutritionist in the Disaster Management Authority office reports that out of a total of 320,701 children under the age of five, 45% are undernourished and 7% are severely malnourished. The World Food Programme is involved in child feeding schemes in clinics and early childhood development centres for the under-fives and primary school children are provided with school lunches. However, the most vulnerable children that live in the mountains are not reached and have no access to clinics. Illnesses due to malnutrition and two deaths were reported during the fact-finding mission.
- ♦ The HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is reported by UNAIDS to be at 23.8%. Knowledge about the diseases is extremely limited. There is an urgent need to disseminate accurate HIV/AIDS information and distribute condoms in these communities.
- ♦ There is a need to provide nutritional food to the most vulnerable people, particularly those living in the mountains, the under-fives, the aged, people living with hiv/aids, orphans and single headed families.
- ♦ The district rural water board reported that safe water and sanitation coverage in Qacha's nek is at a low (60% and 10% respectively). In Thaba Tseka safe water coverage was reported to be only 50% and sanitation 25%. People were drinking water from unprotected sources and diarrhoeal diseases originate from contaminated water. Latrine coverage was at 17% which contributes to the contamination of the water sources. People have knowledge of latrines, but cannot afford to erect them. There is an urgent need to assist these communities in the provision of health education and emphasise the need for safe drinking water and the construction of latrines.
- ♦ Only 10% of the land is arable. Deforestation is a growing problem although some reforestation projects have been undertaken by the Red Cross and other organisations.
- ♦ In the case of a Red Cross intervention, food distribution will have to be a main priority in order to assist the most vulnerable people living in the mountains of Qacha's nek and Thaba Tseka.

National Society Profile

There is a nation wide presence of Red Cross volunteers who have been trained in disaster response as part of the disaster response actions teams throughout the LRCS's nine divisions. The LRCS also enjoys a relatively positive image which has been gained through its past involvement in humanitarian activities. There are currently no updated figures available on the number of volunteers the Society has. However, the Society has few resources and limited capacity, which means that a significant intervention would require heavy logistical and human resources assistance from the Federation.

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

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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.

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