

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

COMOROS: VOLCANO ALERT

27 April 2005

The Federation's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity. It is the world's largest humanitarian organization and its millions of volunteers are active in over 181 countries.

In Brief

This Information Bulletin (no. 01/2005) is being issued for information only. The Federation is not seeking funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at this time.

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All International Federation assistance seeks to adhere to the Code of Conduct and is committed to the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. For support to or for further information concerning Federation programmes or operations in this or other countries, or for a full description of the national society profile, please access the Federation's website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

The Situation

The observatory for the Karthala volcano noted abnormal seismic activity on Saturday, 16 April 2005. They issued an alert at 19:00 local time. The volcanic eruption was localized to the interior of the crater in the afternoon of Sunday 17 April and surroundings at 16:00 without lava flow. The expelling of fumes, sand and ashes lasted over 24 hours.

This resulted in the initial and spontaneous displacement of some 5,000 panicking people. Most were south-eastern residents from threatened localities in the areas of Dimani, Wachili and Mbadjini. Frightened families from the villages of Trelezini and Tsorale piled into taxis and buses and headed for the capital Moroni, which lies on the west coast of Grande Comore, about 15 km from Karthala's giant crater.



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Ten days after the initial alert, the principal danger – inhalation of ashes - had passed. All the inhabitants of the affected areas need potable water.

With exception of the town of Moroni and its suburbs, the rural population collected rain water in uncovered cisterns. This water became unusable because of ash contamination in which recent analyses determined very high pH, sulphate and calcium levels. The national emergency plan has been activated. Comoros Red Crescent representatives are part of a crisis cell which brings together the Ministry of Defence and other key government ministries, island representatives, the Weather Service and the National Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (CNDRS).



The government has deployed a significant military human contingent with hardware, including transport and telecommunications, charged with ensuring security in the zone at the risk as well as the protection of the population. Tectonic activity was noticed by residents who reported that cracks and fissures appeared on the flanks of the volcano.

The 2,361-metre Mount Karthala and its forested slopes form most of the land mass of Grande Comore, the main island in the Comoros chain which lies 300 km off east Africa. The earliest reference to Karthala's eruption dates back to 1858, when a lava flow passed near to the capital and reached the sea, according to maps by France's National Geographical Institute. In 1903, noxious fumes seeping from cracks killed 17 people. A year later, one person perished in a lava flow, according to observatory data. In April 1977, a fiery torrent of molten rock dribbled from a fissure on the side of Karthala during an eruption, destroying 300 houses in the village of Singani; locals managed to flee to safety. Karthala, which experienced seismic activity a year ago, last erupted on 11 July 1991, when an explosion at the summit hurled boulders for several kilometres but caused no injuries.

Red Cross and Red Crescent action

Teams of the gendarmerie (local police) and the Comoros Red Crescent were the first to reach the areas at risk and take protective measures for the population. The teams noted the presence of clouds of ash and sand-rain that caused panic among the population in that region. They witnessed a massive population evacuation which took place towards the regions of Hamahamet, Boinkou and Moroni, transiting through the village of Koimbani. The total number of people displaced is estimated at 10,000.

An initial request from the government for the provision of 100,000 protection masks is no longer a priority according to the national society and PIROI.¹ However, PIROI was called to assist with the supply of water to 36 villages whose population is estimated at more than 30,000 people.

PIROI coordinated, with the Nairobi regional delegation, the deployment of support for the Comoros. The main objectives are:

- to assess and support the purification of drinking water reserves for the population exposed to potential risks of water point contamination (village rainwater),
- to position, if necessary, in the affected villages, drinking water reserves (10 water bladders 1 000 m3), and
- to support the village populations with cleaning water cisterns, with the support of Comoros Red Crescent volunteer teams.



¹ PIROI - the Indian Ocean Regional Disaster Response Platform, spearheaded by the French Red Cross from La Réunion.

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On 23 April, the PIROI dispatched by air a water engineer and 600 kg of materials including water bladders with a capacity of 10,000 and 15,000 litres, motor-driven pumps, kits of water analysis and tarpaulins. The French Red Cross delegate is currently working with 25 Comoros Red Crescent volunteers in cleaning water tanks and refilling them with clean water.

The volunteers conduct their work in extremely difficult circumstances under scorching sun in deep and dark cisterns. They have to fight the deep mud and nauseating odours for long hours but they remain very motivated and committed.

Government and UNICEF personnel are also engaged in the operation. It is estimated that the activity will continue for one month when the operation is expected to be handed over to the Comoros Red Crescent.

Other NGO's, international organizations, and UNDP-coordinated UN agencies are assisting. Vehicles and four flexible, 3000-litre capacity tanks were provided by UNICEF which intends to provide food assistance to the disaster victims. The NGO Afrique CAPE, which has conducted significant community development activities in Wachili and Dimani, is also assisting.

The Federation's regional delegation in Nairobi maintains constant communication with Movement partners in Comoros as well as other humanitarian organisations. The newly-appointed Federation Head of Indian Ocean sub-regional office will review the situation in the Comoros, and also attend the national society's General Assembly (29 April).

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 2005 Annual Appeal no. 05AA006 – Indian Ocean sub-regional programmes (includes Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and the sub-regional office – http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf_appeals.pl?annual05/05AA006.pdf .

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