

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

CHINA: XINJIANG SNOWFALL

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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 183 countries.

In Brief

This Bulletin (no. 01/2006) is being issued for information only, and reflects the status of the situation and information available at this time. The Federation is not seeking funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at present.

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For longer-term programmes in this or other countries or regions, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal. For support to or for further information concerning Federation programmes or operations in this or other countries, or for national society profiles, please also access the Federation's website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

The Situation

Since 29 December 2005, unusually heavy snowfalls and extreme drops in temperature have gripped most parts of northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, affecting a reported 622,000 people in Altay, Tacheng and Ili prefectures of northern Xinjiang and leaving 224,800 people stranded. According to the latest statistics, about 97,000 people have been evacuated to safer areas, while the severe weather has killed more than 9,000 head of livestock so far. Among the worst affected areas in Xinjiang is Altay prefecture, which lies in the northernmost part of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, bordering on Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia.

According to government statistics, there are some 1.29 million herders in Xinjiang¹. In a



A map locating China's remote western province of Xinjiang where violent blizzards have forced the evacuation of around 97,000 people (AFP/Graphic/Martin Megino).

¹ Although many herders continue to live in traditional gers (tents), local government statistics reports that 78 percent of the 1.29 million herders are living in permanent homes provided by the government at the end of 2004. Many herding families supplement their income with jobs in factories or at the region's trading ports. Xinjiang was rated 14th out of all of China's provinces and autonomous regions, according to the UNDP's recently published Human Development Index (HDI) for China.

region where herding has been the primary source of income for the rural population for thousands of years, unusually heavy snowfalls and lower than normal temperatures can be particularly devastating. Normally, Xinjiang's herders and animals that thrive there are able to cope with the cold temperatures and heavy snowfall that is typical to the wintering region. Xinjiang's winters usually last for about six months with frequent blizzards, and herders cope by migrating from one place to another, searching for fodder and water for their livestock.

This year however, overtly heavy snowfall is preventing the livestock from finding enough food to sustain themselves – for example, snow in the plains has already reached some 60 centimetres, while in mountainous areas, snow can reach up to one meter of snow. At the same time, the heavier than usual deposits of snow are too deep for smaller animals, such as sheep and goats, to navigate. To date, a total of 9,234 animals have died. To improve the situation, rescuers are preparing dry cow and sheep dung for livestock to rest on to prevent animals from resting in the snow, getting stranded and being left to die in the unusually heavy snow drifts. Along with evacuating families, local government officials have been organizing rescue teams to move stranded herders and livestock to safer areas. The government is also providing affected families with flour, coal, winter items and feed for the animals.

As of the second week of January, the Red Cross Society of China's (RCSC) Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region branch has identified Altay prefecture, Fu Wun county, Qing He county, Ha Ba He county and Bu Jin county as among the worst affected areas, with some 69,000 people in this area alone seriously affected by the heavy snowfalls. While many of the affected have been evacuated to safer areas, 25,000 people remain in these counties and prefectures, out of which 5,700 people have sought treatment for illnesses and injuries related to the disaster. More snow has begun to fall in Altay prefecture, while further heavy snowfalls are anticipated throughout Xinjiang. Xinjiang is home to a substantial Muslim community that celebrates the Corban festival, also known as Id al-Gurban, a festival where people slay livestock for celebrations. In the context of the challenges introduced by the disaster this year, the celebration's rituals will have added significance, as mutton will be shared with friends and family members travelling long distances through harsh conditions from winter pastures, and government aid workers who have come to the region with relief assistance.

In addition to the usual factors that contribute to the vulnerability of the affected population, Xinjiang's rural communities have also been faced with several outbreaks of bird flu, most recently in November, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of birds. Poultry farmers who are trying to make up for losses by taking out bank loans to raise sheep and oxen are once again finding their livelihoods threatened by these exceptionally harsh winter conditions.

Red Cross and Red Crescent action

To date, the Red Cross Society of China's (RCSC) headquarters in Beijing has released 2,000 quilts and 1,000 sets of winter clothing to the region. The RCSC's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region branch has distributed relief items such as quilts and winter clothing valued at RMB 100,000 (CHF 15,852) to affected families. The RCSC branches in Beijing and Shanghai are also seeking out ways of providing assistance to the region. According to the latest information provided by the RCSC's Xinjiang branch, there is a further need for coal, quilts, warm clothing, medicine and food (wheat flour) to the affected area.

On 13 January 2006, an assessment team led by the RCSC's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region branch will head out to Altay prefecture, one of the primary subdivisions of Xinjiang's Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture (China's only Kazakh autonomous prefecture). The Federation's regional disaster management delegate is planning to join this assessment team.

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