

BANGLADESH - CYCLONE

20 May 1997

The Context

A severe tropical cyclone "One Bravo" gathered intensity in the Bay of Bengal and, as predicted, struck the south-eastern coast of Bangladesh yesterday, Monday, 19th May 1997, crossing the Chittagong - Feni coast North of Chittagong at approximately 18.30 hours. Wind speeds of up to 250 kilometres per hour were recorded and the cyclone created serious damage and flooding in the eastern coastal belt area of Bangladesh which is home to approximately 4 million people. The effects of the cyclone were felt mostly along two hundred kilometres coastal area between the port city of Chittagong and Teknaf, at the Southern tip of Bangladesh. The densely populated coastal flatland was hit by torrential rain, flooding and violent squally winds, causing severe damage to housing and crops and leaving estimated several hundred thousands people homeless and destroying their source of income.

The actual damage assessment, done by the BDRCS/Federation, as described below, by the Bangladesh government and other agencies, is not yet completed and accurate statistics not yet available. The preliminary reports, indicate that while the power of this cyclone was comparable to the one which has hit same coastal areas back in 1991 and killed some 140,000 people, this time the death toll is substantially lower (at this point various estimations put it between 40 and 300 people, but this may still change). This is largely due to the BDRCS Cyclone Preparedness Programme, its effective community awareness campaigns and warning systems and the mobilisation of the 15,000 volunteers in the affected area, who were the major organisational force in evaluating of approximately 1 million people to the cyclone shelters in the area. Potential loss of life was therefore significantly reduced.

Red Cross / Red Crescent Action

Assessment of damage and relief needs - the most crucial at this stage of the operation - continues. The BDRCS CPP network staff are closely monitoring the situation via the 70 radio stations in the coastal belt. The CPP volunteers are currently involved in conducting on-the-ground assessments of damage, and this information is fed through the radio network to the BDRCS Headquarters, where it is being consolidated and cross matched with information received from the other sources.

The BDRCS/Federation has chartered a plane in order to conduct an aerial survey of the eastern coastal belt between Chittagong and Teknaf; this assessment is taking place today and will continue tomorrow. The survey will form the basis for damage

assessment, and will provide much needed information about the immediate needs of the affected population.

On 19th May 1997, the BDRCS/Federation also despatched three assessment teams to the affected areas. These teams are currently located between Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.

As a preliminary response to the most acute needs, the BDRCS, with support from the Federation and utilising the CHF 200,000 loan from DREF, approved by the Secretariat, has mobilised resources to carry out an initial relief operation. 7.5 kg chira (compressed rice), 2.5 kg ghur (molasses) and 0.5 kg iodised salt, as a five day emergency ration will be distributed to 1,000 vulnerable families. In a second-phase, a two week food ration of 30 kg of rice, 5 kg of lentils and 2 litres of soya bean oil will be distributed to 2,000 families. Since vast numbers of houses and dwellings were destroyed, plastic sheeting and tarpaulins will be distributed to provide shelter.

On 20th May, the BDRCS sent two relief trucks from the National Headquarters to the three Branches in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. The Branch volunteers distributed 400 tarpaulins, 20 rolls of plastic sheeting, 100 jerry cans, 500 mugs, 500 pieces of crockery, 500 aluminium plates, 5,000 pieces of second-hand clothing, 50 bars of soap, 1 ton of compressed rice and 120 kilos of ghur. Six medical teams with first aid volunteers have been mobilised and are ready to move. A tracing team has also been sent to the area.

Government activities in response to the disaster are co-ordinated by the Prime Minister's office. The local authorities are providing emergency relief, and the army will assist where it is necessary.

The BDRCS/Federation is participating in the UNDP and in the NGO Disaster Forum co-ordinating meetings.

The critical mass of data on the damage and needs will be available from the BDRCS/Federation Delegation by tomorrow, 21 May, 1997. This will allow the Federation to launch the Preliminary Appeal.

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