

BANGLADESH: REPATRIATION OF TRIBAL REFUGEES TO THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

08 December 1997

Information Bulletin N° 01

The Disaster

The agreement reached earlier this week between the Bangladesh government (GoB) and the Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of the tribal political party in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area, brought to an end 14 years of armed dispute in the region. The way is now clear for the repatriation of the 9,196 Tribal families (43,092 persons) remaining in the neighbouring Indian state of Tripura, where they took refuge during the years of confrontation.

Altogether, over 12,000 families (more than 50,000 persons) of the Tribal people sought refuge in India. Limited repatriation began in 1994. Agreements reached between the governments of India and Bangladesh and the tribal leaders in the period 1994 to April 1997 resulted in the organised repatriation of 2,275 families and the spontaneous repatriation of an estimated 854 families.

On 21 November the first phase of the final repatriation began, covering 1,216 families (6,684 persons). As of 24 November, a total of 550 families composed of 3,214 persons had entered Bangladesh. On average, approximately 125 to 150 families (some 1,000 people) were arriving each day. The returnees included old people and many young children. They carried few possessions and did not bring any domestic animals with them. Most of them were in good health. A few cases of illness were reported but these were mostly diarrhoea or respiratory problems. This first phase, which ended on 30 November, was to be followed by a second phase which will continue until early/mid December and consist of the return of 1,361 families, totalling 6,388 persons.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

In response to a GoB request, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), with Federation support, will supply each returning registered family with supplementary food parcels, complementing a government rice ration, to help them through the first half-year of their resettlement. Supplies, consisting of lentils, cooking oil and salt, are being handed over during a series of distributions, covering initially the first three months requirements for all repatriating families. The distributions are taking place at the border entry-point reception centres.

After the first three months' assistance, a mid-term assessment will take place to plan possible continuation into the next three months operation.

The BDRCS, the Federation and the GoB are closely co-ordinating all activities. On 25 November a Federation reporting delegate and a local staff member visited the Khagrachari District to observe the situation.

Government Action •

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) provided the refugees who returned in the 1994 - April 1997 period with rice and cash, and resettled a number of them on their original land or on Government land.

The current repatriation operation is using a list of refugee families living in the five camps in India, verified and accepted by the GoB, for the registration and recording of the returnees. This is being done at two Reception Centres set up by the GoB at Ramgahr and Tablachari in Khagrachari District on the Bangladesh side of the Feni River which forms the border between India and Bangladesh. The returnees are registered, medically examined, fed and given a three month food package before they return to their respective villages. Buses and trucks then transport them to temporary shelters at Sub-Reception Centres where they will stay while re-establishing permanent residence.

The government, municipal and village-level authorities, security forces and local volunteers (VDPs) are all involved in facilitating the return and resettlement of the refugees. Furthermore, members of the local communities have agreed to give one day of free labour to help the returnees rebuild their homes.

The repatriation is the responsibility of the GoB. The process is conducted by the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachari District. The GoB provides a comprehensive benefit package to the returnees consisting of: a cash grant of 25,000 Taka (806 CHF), essential food (rice) for twelve months and two bundles of corrugated iron (CI) sheets per family. In addition, it is giving 10,000 Taka for a pair of bullocks to each returning family having tillable land or 3,000 Taka for a cow to those who have no land. The money and the first part of the rice ration are given to the returnees on their arrival at the Reception Centres, together with the first supplementary food ration from the BDRCS. The CI sheets will be handed over to the returnees at the Sub-Reception Centres.

Other Agencies' Action •

Apart from the Federation, no other international organisation was requested to participate in or support the repatriation.

Needs

Assessment of Needs •

When the refugees return, they will have to start building houses, finding work and growing crops. This could take up to one year, since the area is less socio-economically developed than most other parts of Bangladesh. The BDRCS food ration is considered vital to help the returnees to settle properly, as customary slash and burn cultivation and poor soil conditions reduce and delay crop production.

The BDRCS is working in close co-ordination with the local administration at the distribution points. Procurement of commodities has been done jointly by the Federation Delegation and BDRCS. The BDRCS warehouses in Chittagong are being used to store commodities after procurement. In addition, there is a small warehouse in Khagrachari and at each distribution point.

The ration for three months will consist of: 12 kg of lentils, 6 litres of cooking oil, 6 kg of salt.

At BDRCS National Headquarters, a Co-ordinator, one Field Co-ordinator and two Assistant Field Co-ordinators have been nominated. The BDRCS and the Federation delegation in Dhaka dispatched a team of officers to Khagrachari District for the duration of the operation. The

Khagrachari Red Cross Unit has provided local volunteers to pack food items into parcels for the first phase distribution and will assign Red Cross youth, as required, to help with the operation.

Capacity of the National Society •

The BDRCS has considerable experience in distributing supplementary food to returnees as this has been done on a regular basis over the last four years.

Present Capacity of the Federation in Bangladesh •

The Federation Delegation in Bangladesh has been monitoring the distributions of supplementary food to Tribal returnees on a regular basis and will endeavour to continue to do so.

Budget summary

For details, see annex 1.

In order to launch the operation for the first three months, and begin the immediate procurement of rations for 9,196 families CHF 300,000 has been released from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF).

Conclusion

The refugees have been living in camps for many years under difficult conditions, and will face further hardship while resettling in their home villages. Their repatriation is an essential element for the continuation of the peace process in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It is expected that the current flow of refugees will be maintained. There will probably be a break in the refugee flow around early/mid December as a result of the cold weather, after which it is expected that repatriation will resume.

This is a high profile programme for the BDRCS: with support from the Federation, it is providing much needed humanitarian assistance, as well as contributing to the resolution of one of the longest civil disturbances in the region. Cash contributions to assist this operation and to replenish the DREF are encouraged and would be appreciated. For further information, please contact Ms. Juja Kim, Desk Officer for Bangladesh (41.22.730.4525).

Ann Naef
Acting Head
Appeals & Reports Service

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia and Pacific Department