

CHILE: EARTHQUAKE

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Summary

Vulnerable communities in Chile's poverty stricken Region IV, living predominantly on small scale farming, have suffered from repeated natural disasters in recent years. When a massive earthquake struck in mid-October, a beleaguered population was left with few coping mechanisms. In the village of Chalinga - the main Red Cross target area - all houses but one were destroyed by the quake. The disaster follows a three-year drought and then sudden unseasonable rains (more than ten times the norm) which caused floods leading to a state of emergency last June.

Due to the magnitude of these repeated disasters, in conjunction with the International Federation, the Chilean Red Cross is now planning a more extensive programme, as foreshadowed in the International Federation's first information bulletin earlier this month. After the immediate needs of a wider population have been covered, the scope of the intended longer-term operation will be targeted towards the reconstruction of 86 houses in Chalinga, initiating preventive health and disaster preparedness activities in the affected communities integrated with the provision of training and equipment for staff and volunteers in the 14 Red Cross branches which cover the disaster site.

The Disaster

An earthquake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale struck a large area of central Chile, 500 km north of the capital Santiago de Chile on 14 October 1997, followed by some 150 aftershocks. The worst hit provinces were Elquí, Limari and Choapa in Region IV, where eight people were killed and more than 40,000 affected. Over 5,000 houses - constructed with sun-dried bricks, already weakened through recent unseasonable rains - collapsed, with damage to a further 10,000 dwellings. At present some 2,000 persons are living in temporary shelter; government estimates put the need for temporary housing at 10,000 units.

According to the Chilean Red Cross rural areas are the most affected with some of the villages around Illapel, Ovalle Punitaqui and Salamanca almost totally razed. In the hours following the disaster, communications with the affected region were completely cut, delaying the damage evaluation and the rescue work, especially in the remote areas. The new bridge on the Pan-American highway - recently constructed to replace the structure destroyed by floods in June - collapsed and landslides cut the access to rural roads; telecommunication, electricity and water became inoperable.

The Response so far

Government Action •

The government has declared an emergency in Region IV, despatching aid both by air and road. The national emergency office, which coordinates the country's disaster response activities, is working

through its regional offices. Community emergency centres are active and the Chilean Air Force has despatched a temporary hospital and two helicopters to the stricken area.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action •

Immediately following the emergency, the Chilean Red Cross established a work group to coordinate and follow-up its response. The team comprises the National Society chairman, the national relief director and representatives from regional and local branches. The International Federation's Regional Delegation in Buenos Aires remains in close contact and receives the group's situation reports.

Some 450 volunteers from seven Red Cross branches in the affected region are helping victims temporarily accommodated in evacuation centres, visiting destroyed houses and providing first aid.

The Chilean Red Cross national headquarters has despatched clothing, blankets and mattresses to the area. The Society has launched a national appeal supported by the media nationwide and an emergency relief account set up to receive cash donations - but due to the magnitude of the disaster, international help could soon be requested. The Chilean Red Cross is continuing its discussions with the country's European Union office.

The Head of Federation Regional Delegation in Buenos Aires visited Chile two days after the disaster and an experienced international relief delegate from the Colombian Red Cross joined the Chilean Red Cross national relief director, both to evaluate the stricken area and to help branches identify the most urgent needs. An allocation of CHF 130,000 has been made from the International Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund to help meet the immediate/emergency phase.

Coordination •

According to information received from the Chilean Red Cross, no other international agencies are involved. Meanwhile the Society is maintaining permanent contact with the relevant authorities at national, regional and community level and activities are being coordinated in conjunction with the local authorities. Especially important is the coordination with the national emergency office, which has overall responsibility for all emergency actions in Chile

Needs

Assessment of Needs •

An International Federation relief delegate was assigned to Chile to assist the National Society in evaluating the situation. The delegate, the National Society relief director and volunteers from the branches concerned visited the region during one week - including some of the remote villages - and, in meetings with local authorities, have identified the worst affected communities. In Chalinga (population 400), the total destruction of all houses but one was evident.

Immediate Needs •

The Red Cross Red Crescent evaluation in the disaster area confirmed an urgent need for food, kitchen utensils, materials and tools to repair the homes of 500 families (2,600 persons approx). In Chalinga the complete rebuilding of 86 houses (anti-seismic, 48m², two rooms, kitchen, bathroom, running water and electricity) is also a priority to help a further 400 of the worst affected victims begin restoring their lives.

Anticipated Needs •

After the emergency phase, the branches of Ovalle, Los Vilos, Illapel, Salamanca, Vicuña and Coquimbo need to rehabilitate their headquarters, damaged in the earthquake. Provision of communication and transportation facilities for local Red Cross branches is also anticipated. The area targeted by the planned operation has suffered repeated disasters and its very remoteness adds to the economic difficulties and vulnerability of the population.

Therefore, the Chilean Red Cross does not intend to restrict the action only to relief, but plans to implement grass-roots level preventive health and disaster preparedness training. Community-based activities are at the heart of Chilean Red Cross programmes and the present emergency has also demonstrated the importance of integrating still further key initiatives of the 14 branches in the affected area with their local communities, especially Chalinga.

Intended Red Cross Plan of Action

Objectives •

Key priorities for the Chilean Red Cross through the intended operation are:

- To provide 2,600 earthquake victims with food and housing repair materials
- To reconstruct 86 houses (for 400 beneficiaries) in Chalinga village, also involving the community directly in this project
- To implement community based disaster preparedness and preventive health care activities in the most affected communities
- To enhance training and equipment for staff and volunteers in the 14 Red Cross branches which cover the affected area of Region IV, with particular emphasis on community-based disaster preparedness and preventive health care activities.

Emergency Phase: *October 14th-November 1997* •

The National Society has distributed emergency relief items (2,300 kg food, 100 mattresses and 400 bed sheets), provided first aid, including psychological support, to 650 victims and assisted those in the temporary shelters with medical check-ups, bedding and food. Four hundred families are each to receive a 'one off' food parcel comprising sugar (4 kg), flour (10kg), tea (1 kg), rice (4 kg), oil (2 litres), pasta (6 kg), milk powder (4 kg), hygiene items (soap, toilet paper etc), detergent (6 kg), salt (1 kg), beans (2 kg), housing repair materials and tools.

Phase Two: *November 1997 - April 1998* •

The focus will be on organising the community to participate in the rebuilding of 86 destroyed houses in Chalinga and providing communication and transport facilities to enable the branches to carry out this work. Training will be given in community-based disaster preparedness and preventive health care, targeting community members, including Red Cross staff and volunteers.

Capacity of the National Society •

The Chilean Red Cross has a recognised organisational and administrative network across the whole country, working through nearly 200 local branches, headed by 12 regional committees. In the disaster area, the Red Cross strength comprises 200 volunteers in 14 branches, coordinated by the regional committee of Salamanca; the branch closest to the earthquake zone is in Ovalle, 23 km from Chalinga.

Present Capacity of the International Federation in the Southern Cone of the Americas •

The Chilean Red Cross is served by the International Federation's Regional Delegation for the Southern Cone based in Buenos Aires, which provides technical and operational support. An International Federation relief delegate was assigned for the evaluation phase, in the wake of the disaster.

Conclusion

In the best traditions of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, the Chilean Red Cross is seeking to bring help to those who need it most. The international community, including National Societies, will be kept regularly informed of progress as events unfold. In the meantime, the Director of the International Federation's Americas department Santiago Gil (41-22-730-4391) or programme officer Luis Luna (41-22-730-4274) are available to provide further information as required.

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