

ARABIAN SEA: CYCLONE

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The Disaster

Cyclone 02a reached landfall during the early morning hours local time on 20 May after picking up speed as it approached the coast of both Pakistan and India. Sustained winds have been reported at 170 miles per hour (274 kms per hour). The eye of the storm hit right at the border and is proceeding across Sindh Province in southern Pakistan, apparently having a larger impact on Pakistan than India. Hundreds of villagers are reported to have been swept away and thousands are reported as missing, but it is too early to know if they reached safe ground or not. In the most affected area the majority of the inhabitants make their living through fishing and live in thatch roofed huts, easily destroyed by high winds and water. Standing crops have been lost but the longer term impact is yet to be assessed.

This is not an area known to be prone to cyclones, hence coping with its affects places an additional burden on the victims and relief workers. While the cyclone is beginning to break up as it travels across the land, it still packs high winds and heavy rains, and continues to push the storm surge into the low lying coastal belt, as well as spawning thunderstorms in its wide path. Communications with much of the affected area has been cut off due to downed telephone lines. Travel is all but impossible due to high seas, heavy rain, strong winds, and the damage caused to the infrastructure itself.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Both the Pakistan Red Crescent (PRCS) and Indian Red Cross (IRCS) Societies put their branches on high alert as the storm approached, and were able to track the storm with information from their respective meteorological and government disaster response services. In Islamabad, the PRCS headquarters has its emergency team in place and resources mobilised.

The Sindh Provincial Branch of the PRCS took steps to encourage a prompt evacuation by announcing early warning through the mosque loudspeakers. They were on "red alert" as the storm approached and in constant contact with the meteorological department of the government. Staff and volunteers were quickly mobilised and disaster stocks designated for the impending relief operation. The affected areas in Pakistan are Shah Bandar, Keti Bandar, Thatta, Badin, and Hyderabad. Mirpurkhas is in the path of the storm and heavy rains are expected there.

It is estimated that 10,000 people are directly affected. At least 150 people are missing but news reports put the number much higher. As search and rescue operations continue, the casualty and missing list will change. There is additional concern for fishermen who took to sea in their trawlers to ride out the storm but it will be several days before their status is known.

Naval troops and PRCS workers are on stand-by in Karachi to move into the affected areas as soon as conditions permit. Where the cyclone has subsided, government staff are conducting damage assessments which will help the PRCS determine if an international appeal will be needed.

The International Federation has two delegates on stand-by (seconded from the Afghanistan Delegation) for assistance to the PRCS if required. The South Asia Regional Delegation is available and ready to assist the IRCS if needed.

Needs

It is too early to determine what assistance needs the National Societies may require but relief stocks will be positioned too ensure that adequate levels are available. In view of the early start of the cyclone season, the Sindh Provincial Red Cross Branch has determined that tents, jerrycans, water purification tablets, and medicine will initially be required..

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