

BANGLADESH: FLOODS

19 July 1999

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The Disaster

Seasonal monsoon flooding in Bangladesh has entered its fifth week, with 33 of the country's 64 districts suffering at some point during this period. The monsoon started early on 7 June with heavy downpours. Flooding began with three days of torrential rain from 20 June onwards that caused flash floods in the southern districts of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar and the hill districts of Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari, affecting about 400,000 people. By 1 July, 15 districts were affected with an unofficial death toll of 11 and about 1.5 million people affected.

The historical precedent of severe flooding in consecutive years in Bangladesh i.e. 1954/55, 1962/63, 1970/71 and 1987/88 is causing concern, with many people anticipating another serious flood this year.

The exceptionally high rainfall in the neighbouring Indian states of Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya caused a heavy onrush of water, resulting in extensive erosion in many areas and leaving thousands homeless and landless. Dykes and embankments along the rivers were breached at several points bringing an extra dimension to this year's flooding.

A 100 ft. breach in the 60 km long Gumti embankment in the early hours of 12 July sent water surging through crop fields and dwelling houses in five Thanas (sub-districts) of Comilla district, waking villagers who suddenly found themselves chest deep in water. Previous to this, the area had been a comparatively flood free zone. Despite the repair of the breach, waters engulfed more and more areas until 17 July, when the water level of the river started flowing below the danger level. By then, according to government figures, 470,254 persons of 96,698 families were already affected, with four deaths and 14 injured. Crops on 21,085 acres of land were destroyed completely while 41,094 acres have been damaged. Approximately 300 km of roads have been damaged, many still under knee deep water, while 69,500 people are housed in 63 flood shelters opened by the government.

Government figures confirmed 159 of the country's 464 Thanas as being affected by floods as of 13 July. At this time, of 39 water level monitoring points, 24 registered a rise, 13 registered a fall while 2 remained static. The unofficial death toll rose to 19. The next day, the number of affected Thanas stood at 122, indicating a slight improvement in the overall situation, but some fresh areas had become inundated. With fewer rains, the overall flood situation improved during the week. Water levels fell at 25 points on 17 July, with a rise recorded at 13 and 1 remaining static.

The monsoon became more active on 17 July, and is likely to continue over the next few days. Particularly alarming however, is the increasing river erosion and new breaches in embankments. Some 2,000 feet of the Laxmipur embankment have been breached and further breaches on Dhulsor embankment at Manikganj and erosion along other river banks are threatening the entire Harirampur Thana.

Government relief and health activities continue. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited the area on 18 July, and announced that the Government would provide foodgrains free of cost to the worst affected people until the next harvest is reaped. UNICEF has supplied some baby food in the affected areas while the Department of Public Health Engineering is installing tubewells and sanitary latrines at shelters. No substantial NGO action has been launched yet.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Needs Assessment

A number of needs assessment survey missions were made by the BDRCS/Federation during the past week. A Federation Programme Officer and a deputy director of BDRCS went to the affected areas in Comilla on 14 July, where they met local BDRCS unit officials, district administration officials, local leaders and flood affected people.

Three BDRCS board members, senior BDRCS officials and the Federation HoD accompanied a government sponsored day long mission on 16 July to inspect erosion caused by the Meghna river. The Water Resources minister, one of the team members, requested the BDRCS/Federation to assist with resettlement of displaced persons.

Another needs assessment team from the Health Department of BDRCS visited Comilla on 16 July, to identify the immediate health needs of the flood victims. They held discussions with unit officials, local administration representatives and medical authorities.

Relief

Up to 19 July, BDRCS has despatched 36,500 kg of rice, 6,500 kg of dal (lentil), 400 aluminium mugs, 100 sarees, 100 buckets with mug, 100 bales & 1,000 pieces of clothing, 300 tiffin carriers (food containers) and 10 rolls of plastic, to 18 districts, of which 4,000 kg of rice and 800 kg of dal went to Comilla. The Comilla local unit purchased 1,650 kg of flattened rice (chira) and 350 kg of molasses (ghur) from its own resources and has already distributed them to the flood victims.

Based on the recommendation of the medical assessment team, 10,000 packets of Oral Rehydration Salts and 10,000 water purification tablets were sent to Comilla today, 19 July. In addition, ten mobile health teams are being placed on standby in case the situation there deteriorates further .

Procurement of relief goods out of contributions received following the issue of the previous information bulletins will be completed soon, with delivery expected within ten days.

Co-ordination

In addition to in-house co-operation and dialogue, close liaison is maintained with government agencies, UN agencies and NGO co-ordinating bodies -- the Disaster Management Bureau, the Water Development Board, the ministry of Relief, the UNDP, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) and Disaster Forum. Contacts with the district units in the flood affected areas are constantly maintained and a control room has already been opened at the NHQ. Information Bulletins issued by the Federation have been sent to all diplomatic missions and UN agencies. Contacts with foreign and local press and media continue.

Immediate Needs

Joint assessments by the Federation and BDRCS have confirmed the following immediate needs :

- | Food and shelter for the worst affected including those in freshly affected areas.
- | Water transport for rescue and relief services.
- | Food especially for babies, mothers and the elderly.
- | Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) and Water Purification Tablets (WPT).

The BDRCS management board met today to discuss the current situation. It decided not to launch an appeal at the moment as contributions received so far meet the most urgent needs for 28,000 of the worst affected families.

However, the BDRCS will be closely monitoring the situation during the coming weeks and will remain on high alert at both branch and NHQ level. This preparedness will enable an international appeal to be launched immediately should the overall situation worsen and additional intervention become necessary. For further information, please contact Kentaro Nagazumi, tel: 0041 22 7304 273 or email nagazumi@ifrc.org

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding & Reporting Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Director
Asia & Pacific Department