

SRI LANKA: Floods and storms

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The disaster

Torrential rains uncommon for the time of the year and violent thunderstorms mainly along the western and south-western coast of Sri Lanka caused widespread damage and severe floods in the southwest and south of the country between April 16 - 21, 1999. The main Kelani and Kalu rivers rose by over seven feet, causing additional inundation aggravated by slow run-off. The most affected areas received as much as 290 mm of rain within 24 hours, and even the capital Colombo (284 mm within 24 hrs) experienced severe floods in many sectors of the city. The districts worst affected by the heavy rainfall were Ratnapura, Colombo, Kalutara, Gampaha, Galle, Kandy, Matara and Kegalle, all located in the west, southwest or south of Sri Lanka between the coast and the Kandyan highlands.

Six persons were reported killed due to lightning, landslides and floods. Thousands of houses were either partially damaged or destroyed completely, and initial official figures place the number of homeless at around 75,000 families (375,000 people). The damage was reportedly much worse in the rural areas particularly in Ratnapura District. Landslides and submerged roads made it difficult to gather initial information and assess the situation quickly, however, the necessary assessments were competently carried out by the National Society once access was re-established.

Latest events

The relief operation to assist the most vulnerable sections of those communities affected by the monsoon rains has been successfully completed by the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS). The National Society holds a small stock balance which will be utilised in the next monsoon emergency situation requiring replenishment of lost essential items. Apart from relief assistance, the National Society is also undertaking a nation-wide community-based disaster preparedness training programme of considerable magnitude funded by ECHO and the British Governments Department for International Development (DFID).

Government Action

The Social Services Department and other Government Agencies provided cooked food for the first three days, and subsequently dry rations for approximately seven days to those who had have lost their homes and are temporarily housed in Government buildings and schools. In one of the Colombo

districts, some 5,000 families were evacuated from an area threatened by an impending landslide. Relief co-ordination units working 24 hours each day had been established in the capital and in districts by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. The Sri Lankan Navy assisted with boats to support relief efforts along the coast, and the Air Force utilised its helicopters to fly reconnaissance missions to determine the number of marooned people in need of rescue.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Relief Items (procurement and distribution) w

Immediately after the initial alert, the Federation made available CHF 50,000 from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to support the SLRCS relief activities. Following assessments the newly appointed Relief Committee and the Relief Co-ordinator drew up the following revised operational plan adjusted to the limited cash funds available:

Item	Initially planned assistance to numbers of families	Quantity	Adjusted assistance to numbers of families	Quantity
Bed sheets (2 / family)	5,000	10,000	1,000	2,000
Grass mats (2 / family)	5,000	10,000	1,000	2,000
Galvanised roof sheets (varying per family)	Selected families only	2,000	2,620	3,000
Kitchen Utensils (1 set / family)	Selected families only	3,000	1,250	1,250

Procurement was undertaken by the SLRCS Finance Committee as soon as the funding had been made available. By the end of July, all the procured items had been distributed as follows:

District / Division	Initial No of families affected	Families assisted	Mats	Bed sheets	Kitchen utensils	Roofing sheets
Galle	10,000	358	110	165	152	466
Matara	100	565	614	329	262	336
Kalutara	3,474	369	300	150	153	629
Ratnapura	24,409	869	467	468	299	717
Gampaha	8,846	829	399	693	232	376
Kegalle	222	17	0	0	0	136
Colombo	26,866	70	52	36	20	320
T O T A L	73,917	3,077	1,942	1,841	1,118	2,980
Purchased	--	--	2,000	2,000	1,250	3,000
Distributed	--	--	1,942	1,841	1,118	2,980
Stock balance	--	--	58	159	132	20

The SLRCS will use the small remaining stock balances for future relief distributions. The National Society also proposes to utilise the relatively small balance of funds to procure selected relief items for future similar emergencies, and to purchase several iron racks to improve the storage of the items.

Outstanding needs

Although no current needs remain, the effectiveness and the impact of this intervention was somewhat reduced by the limited level of funding available.

Conclusion

The speedy allocation of the DREF funding enabled the SLRCS to carry out this relief intervention on a timely basis. As soon as the affected areas were accessible, vulnerability assessments were undertaken and government statistics verified. The SLRCS effectively maximised the use of limited funding by carefully selecting the most vulnerable members of the affected population. Relief distribution was carried out swiftly and restocking was accomplished. Independent from this relief operation, the National Society is also undertaking a nation-wide and very comprehensive community-based disaster preparedness training programme.

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