

INDIA/GUJARAT: EARTHQUAKE

27 January 2001

appeal no. 04/01 (preliminary)

situation report no. 01

period covered: 26-27 January 2001

The full picture of the death and devastation caused by yesterday's earthquake in western India is only just starting to emerge. An advance assessment team from the International Federation and the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) is on the ground in the disaster zone as the overall direction and composition of the Red Cross Red Crescent operation takes shape.

The context

India's largest earthquake in a half a century struck the western state of Gujarat yesterday morning (Friday) at 08.50 hours, bringing widespread death and destruction, with tremors felt in New Delhi and Bombay and also affecting neighbouring Pakistan. There are differing estimates of the magnitude of the quake, varying between 6.9 and 7.9 on the Richter scale. Although the disaster struck a remote and relatively sparsely populated area, there are major population centres within less than 100 kilometres of the epicentre, notably Ahmadabad, regarded as the state's commercial capital and Bhuj, home to 150,000 people. Inevitably, the event has had a major and adverse effect on local infrastructure and transport links, adding still further to severe communications difficulties.

Latest events

With India - and the world - starting to comprehend the scale of the disaster, much attention has focused on the ever-rising death toll, with Indian officials reportedly putting the figure above 10,000 with 2,000 bodies recovered to date. The number of injured is unclear at this stage: at least 30,000

people according to some sources. Both statistics seem likely to rise and parallels are now being drawn with the Turkey earthquake of August 1999, which killed over 17,000 people.

The Indian prime minister has described the quake as “a calamity of national magnitude” and spoken of meeting the emergency “on a war footing”. The country’s disaster management group (DMG) is mobilising relief and medical supplies, including 10,000 tents, 10,000 tonnes of grain and quantities of whole blood. Help is also coming from the neighbouring state of Maharashtra, which experienced India’s last major earthquake in September 1993.

By nightfall yesterday, relief efforts were starting to move into full swing, with the airlift of the first shipments of food, medicine and tents into the stricken region.

As yet, the Indian government has not requested international assistance but has indicated that offers of such assistance will be ‘gratefully accepted’, according to the latest situation report issued by the UN’s office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs (OCHA).

As this report was being finalised, information emerged of the situation in the Kachchh district - India’s largest - where, according to the Gujarat home minister, 125,000 people are trapped under rubble and debris, including 75,000 in Buj, the town nearest the quake’s epicentre. Obviously these details, even if only partially confirmed by events, will have significant implications for the operation as a whole.

Although day time temperatures in the disaster zone are a comfortable 18-20 degree C, at night, these fall to a chilly five - seven degrees, making shelter one of the priorities for the relief effort.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Early this morning, the International Federation’s advance assessment team - comprising the deputy secretary of the IRCS and the regional delegates for disaster preparedness and information - arrived in Ahmadabad, where they immediately linked up with local Red Cross and government officials. According to an early report, earthquake damage is concentrated on one part of the city - the state’s major population and commercial centre - with utilities and public services operating, but hospitals at full stretch.

The team, which carried 80 units of blood from the IRCS blood bank in Delhi for immediate use, found that Badi Lal municipal hospital in Ahmadabad has wards full of badly injured people and the hospital has mobilised all resources to cope with the influx of patients. Many people are being brought in with fractures and broken bones. The head orthopaedic surgeon carried out 30 operations yesterday alone. A blood camp organised today by the local Red Cross hopes to collect at least 300 units of blood.

The regional information delegate now is in transit to Buj (a six to eight hour journey) and is due to arrive this evening.

The IRCS has released 30,000 blankets and 150 large tents, which are being airlifted to the disaster zone. Responding to an urgent call for blood, supplies have been sent to Gujarat from the Red Cross branch in the neighbouring state of Maharashtra and from Delhi. The International Federation has placed an order for 22,000 tarpaulins, due for delivery in the coming days.

Close consultations are continuing between the Federation regional delegation and IRCS headquarters, with the shape and composition of the ongoing and forthcoming operation likely to be much clearer at the end of tomorrow (Sunday), less than three days into the emergency. As indicated in the preliminary appeal, launched yesterday, an emergency response unit (ERU) alert has been issued with a decision on the nature and scale of implementation to be reached when more details emerge of the situation in Buj. Following discussions, support for the IRCS across a number of functions - including health,

logistics, telecommunications, water-sanitation and relief - is en route over this weekend from Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and Austria.

The response from Red Cross Red Crescent Societies and their governments to the International Federation's preliminary appeal for CHF 2 million, issued yesterday - and directly to the IRCS - has been encouraging, including cash pledges from China, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, and with offers of goods and services from Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Finland, Germany, Italy and Japan.

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Outstanding needs

Pending the outcome of the various assessments to be undertaken in the coming hours/days, donors should focus on the requirements outlined in yesterday's preliminary appeal including clothes, blankets, basic medical supplies, shelter and construction materials and provision of clean water and sanitation facilities. The International Federation is making every effort to purchase relief items and other necessities locally and, accordingly, unearmarked cash contributions would be particularly welcome.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

As with previous earthquakes which have generated global attention, the world's media have been relying on Red Cross Red Crescent spokespersons both in the field and Geneva for information, updates and comment. There is clear evidence that the International Federation's website is proving a primary news and information source for many, with the number of 'hits' increasing dramatically since the disaster struck. The BBC's 'help India' web page, published today, starts with details of the International Federation's preliminary appeal.

The Federation's web page featuring India can be found at the following address:
<http://www.ifrc.org/where/country/cn5.asp?countryid=84>

Contributions

A full list of contributions will be published in a later situation report

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This and other reports on Federation operations are available on the Federation's website: <http://www.ifrc.org>