

INDIA/GUJARAT: EARTHQUAKE

28 January 2001

appeal no. 04/2001 (preliminary)

situation report no. 2

period covered: 27 - 28 January 2001

The impact of the earthquake which struck the western state of Gujarat in the early morning of 26 January is devastating. The major town of Ahmadabad has been severely affected, with a significant death toll and huge numbers of casualties. The small town of Bhuj and the surrounding towns and villages are reported to have been reduced to rubble. The Federation has sent in a support team of experienced delegates and the regional information delegate is currently in Bhuj. The Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) has airlifted 30,000 blankets to Ahmadabad and flown in 150 large tents. Immediate needs to assist the survivors of the earthquake are for shelter, blankets, warm clothing and medical supplies.

The context

India's largest earthquake in a half a century struck the western state of Gujarat on the morning of Friday, 26 January at 08.50 hours, bringing widespread death and destruction, with tremors felt in New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay) and also affecting neighbouring Pakistan. The magnitude of the quake has been confirmed as 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. Infrastructure in the region, particularly communications, electricity and water supply, has been severely affected.

Latest events

More than 36 hours have passed since the disaster struck and the major scale of the disaster is now beginning to unfold. Search and rescue efforts have reached a critical stage as rescue workers strive to save people trapped under rubble, although hopes are beginning to fade. However, this morning in the early hours, three survivors were pulled from the debris in Bhuj. Survivors of the quake are badly in need of shelter, clean drinking water and food. Some 200 aftershocks have been registered throughout Gujarat, thereby increasing fears of returning to damaged buildings, with survivors preferring to sleep in the open, despite the cold. In Ahmadabad, it is estimated that over 50 high rise buildings have collapsed. Overall, it is currently reported that 33,000 people have been injured, with numbers rising constantly and hundreds of thousands of people are homeless and in shock.

International Rescue teams are arriving with sniffer dogs and specialist search and rescue equipment. The Indian army and air force has flown in satellite telecommunications equipment and deployed some 5,000 medical, relief and search and rescue personnel.

An overnight statement from government of India indicates that offers of assistance have been received from a number of countries and agencies, following the earthquake. The statement adds “the government of India has decided that while there will be no appeal for seeking assistance, all offers made voluntarily will be gratefully accepted”.

Bhuj and environs •

In Bhuj, a city of 150,000 people, close to the epicentre, 90 per cent of houses are said to have been flattened, together with a hospital and schools. 1,500 bodies have been recovered from the wreckage and over 400 children are feared trapped in a school building. Soldiers are facilitating rescue efforts and heavy cranes have been brought in. The Federation’s regional information delegate who reached Bhuj in the early hours of the morning, reports that search and rescue efforts are complicated by the extent of destruction and narrow alley ways hamper access by bulldozers. Local people are resorting to using their bare hands to clear rubble and save those trapped. All citizens are sleeping outside and there is virtually no food. Nevertheless, hospital services are functioning and 400 amputations were carried out on Saturday, 27 January. There is no electricity and no water in the hospital or in the entire town where power has failed. Units of blood brought in could not be used since without electricity, it is not possible to carry out cross matching of blood.

Local media are reporting that the death toll throughout the state is of 25,000 people. In the area surrounding Bhuj, significant death tolls are rising in the small towns of Anjar, Rajkot, Jamnagar, Surat and Bhacau. Anjar is home to some 30,000 people and is reported to have been totally reduced to rubble.

Pakistan •

Damage from the earthquake has also occurred in Pakistan. The Office of the Relief Commissioner in Hyderabad states that 11 people were killed and 68 injured. It is reported that infrastructure has also sustained damage and buildings have collapsed in major towns

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Three days into the emergency, the Red Cross Red Crescent is mobilising resources rapidly in response to the world's worst earthquake since a similar disaster in Turkey killed more than 17,000 people in August 1999.

Both the IRCS and the International Federation now have officials operating at the heart of the disaster zone; indeed, it seems that the International Federation's regional information delegate was the first official from a major international humanitarian organisation to reach the stricken town. The Federation's regional disaster preparedness delegate is concentrating his efforts in Ahmadabad, where hospitals remain at full stretch.

Meanwhile, close liaison between the IRCS and the International Federation is ongoing, with the Federation's regional chief and IRCS secretary general in constant contact as the operation unfolds. The IRCS is focusing its attention on medical, shelter and blood activities, providing support to local hospitals and transporting quantities of blood to the main critical areas. The Society is airlifting 30,000 blankets to Ahmadabad and has flown 150 large tents from Calcutta. Despite themselves being affected by the disaster, IRCS staff and volunteers in the earthquake zone are reported to be responding and working selflessly to assist quake victims.

An International Federation support team of 15 experienced delegates - covering management, coordination, relief, logistics, health, water-sanitation, telecom, publicity and reporting - is either in India or in transit and will be fully in place early in the coming week. Delegates provided by the Norwegian and German Red Cross Societies have already arrived and also a Japanese Red Cross delegate seconded from Bangladesh. Delegates from Austria, Germany and Spain are also on their way.

The Federation's logistics pipeline currently comprises 600 tents and more than 100,000 blankets donated by the British Red Cross and 22,000 tarpaulins. In Geneva - as in National Society headquarters and branch offices across the globe - officials and their teams have been working virtually non stop since news of the catastrophe first broke on Friday morning. As part of its coordination role, to date, the International Federation has published an alert, a preliminary appeal and two situation reports while the number of media calls handled in Geneva, Delhi and the field is already well into three figures.

As agreed with the IRCS, a medical team is en route to India from the Japanese Red Cross and will assemble in Delhi this evening (Sunday). The American Red Cross has immediately released USD 25,000 to IRCS and sent relief supplies (plastic sheeting and blankets) to the region; a five-person team, including communications and operational planning specialists, is also being put at the disposal of the IRCS and a family linking team is on standby.

A logistician from the Swiss Red Cross has arrived in Ahmadabad on a charter flight carrying more than 5,000 blankets and 50 rolls of plastic sheeting provided by the Swiss Solidarity Chain. A number of National Societies have appealed to the population of their countries for funds in support of the Red Cross Red Crescent operation.

The Finnish Red Cross and the Norwegian Red Cross, with logistical support from the German Red Cross, are currently deploying an Emergency Response Unit (ERU) field hospital to be set up in Bhuj with a capacity of 350 beds, as a gesture of solidarity in response to the overwhelming humanitarian needs.

The Federation is deploying more telecommunications assets to the field and the Swedish international telecommunications group Ericsson, with the whom the International Federation has a global partnership, is providing telecommunications expertise and equipment to the Red Cross Red Crescent in the wake of the current emergency.

These details of Red Cross Red Crescent activities/initiatives are not exhaustive and will be added to or expanded in future situation reports

Outstanding needs

Unearmarked cash contributions in support of the International Federation's preliminary appeal - launched on the day of the disaster - to enable the IRCS to pursue its designated priorities in support of the victims: medical activities, shelter and blood. The Society is seeking to purchase quantities of stretchers, splints, first aid items, antibiotics and medicines to treat diarrhoea as well stepping up blood donor recruitment and supplies from its various centres, including those in Delhi and Maharashtra. Cash is also needed for the local procurement of high protein biscuits, warm clothing and shelter items including tents, blankets, tarpaulins etc. As the full extent of the disaster emerges, the International Federation is gearing up for a major post earthquake operation in support of the IRCS and Red Cross Red Crescent Societies active at home or, when invited by the IRCS, in India.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The Indian Red Cross Society is working in close cooperation with the Disaster Management Group within the Ministry of Agriculture which is responsible for coordination of earthquake relief.

Contributions

A full list of contributions will be issued in situation reports to be issued next week.

Contacts

International Federation contact numbers are as follows:

Geneva Secretariat

Marcel Fortier, Desk Officer : +41.22.730.4268 (office)
+41.79.217.3310 (mobile)
Media Service +41.79.416.3881 (mobile)

New Delhi regional delegation

Bob McKerrow, Head: +91.11.685.8671 (office)
+91.981.000.1534 (mobile)

Field

Patrick Fuller Information: +91.981.009.9794 (mobile) or via Secretariat media service

NB: At present the International Federation has deployed two satellite phones to the disaster zone, currently reserved for outgoing operational traffic. As indicated above, more telecommunications assets are being assigned.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Head a.i.
Relationship Management Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Head
Asia & Pacific Department

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