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## Information bulletin

### Europe: Extreme winter conditions

 International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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This bulletin is being issued for information only, and reflects the current situation and details available at this time. National Red Cross Societies in Central and Eastern Europe have mobilized their volunteers, staff and resources to tackle the current emergency situation due to the extreme winter conditions faced by local communities in recent days.



Macedonian Red Cross volunteers providing homeless people with hot meals and drinks at a reception centre. Photo: *Macedonian Red Cross*.

## Summary

In the last days, an extreme cold wave has gripped countries in Central and Eastern Europe with wind, heavy snow and Siberia-style temperatures, in some areas as low as -30 C, which have so far claimed over 130 lives by hypothermia and frostbite, caused power outages, traffic chaos and seen the closure of schools and nurseries in parts of Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Serbia, Romania, Russia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Italy. Since the very first hours after the temperatures plunged below zero degrees, the National Red Cross Societies have been assisting the most vulnerable people by setting up heated tents at the affected premises to provide makeshift accommodation and dispense hot food and drinks, by distributing blankets and warm clothes, and by providing direct assistance to local reception centres for elderly and homeless people.

## The situation

Freezing temperatures with wind and snow have hit large swathes of Europe over the last days, with temperatures sinking as low as minus 33 Celsius in some areas of Ukraine and Belarus, killing so far over 130 people. According to the Ukrainian Emergency Ministry, thirty-eight more deaths have been registered in the country in the past 24 hours, bringing to 101 the toll from the coldest snap in the last six years, with

people found dead on the streets, in their homes, or some dying despite medical intervention. Most of the victims were reported to be either homeless or elderly and living under poverty level, who were exposed to increased vulnerability not only because of the unusually cold temperatures, but also affected by the ongoing economic crisis.

In the last week, 29 people died in Poland, and 22 people lost their lives in Romania due to sudden blizzards and sharp drops in temperatures. Several people died in Bulgaria, where towns suffered from record-low temperatures. Heavy snowfall in Serbia and neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina left at least 11,000 people cut off from supplies, requiring essential necessities to be delivered by helicopter.

Transport has also been severely affected across much of the region, with road and railway networks in several countries being thrown into chaos by ice, gales and blizzards. Even northern and central Italy's regions have been hit, with train lines disrupted and hundreds of drivers and passengers stuck overnight on trains and highways.

## Red Cross and Red Crescent action

In Belarus, low temperatures have led the **Belarusian Red Cross Society** to launch the operation "*Protecting the homeless from the frost in Belarus*". Belarusian RCS volunteers have started providing residents of Minsk regional centres with hot drinks and meals, and also warm clothes will be handed out to people without permanent residence in the capital. Mobile heating units have been set up both at urban and regional level, while distribution of basic necessities, warm clothing and footwear is being carried out by Red Cross special street units, reaching out to some 1,500 people.

The action will be partly supported by the Belarus Red Cross emergency fund (approx. CHF 5,000). At the same time a DREF operation of CHF 46,072 was launched to cover the related needs. The Belarusian National Society is now working closely with temporary shelter units for homeless people and sanitary centres reaching out to the target group, assessing their needs and establishing for the basis for the future operation. So far, 15 Red Cross staff members and 100 Red Cross volunteers have been engaged in the assessment and immediate response.

Supported by DREF funds, the **Ukrainian Red Cross Society** is providing assistance to some 2,000 people identified as the most exposed to the extreme temperatures and weather like homeless people, people living below the poverty level, unemployed people, and single mothers with one or more children and the elderly. Red Cross volunteers and visiting nurses are assisting by distributing hot meals, hot tea and blankets, throughout the regions where the cold wave had the most serious effects, namely: Harkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Kirovograd, Chernugov, Luganks and Sumi. The Ukrainian National Society is also working with national mass media to raise awareness of the existing needs, cooperating with the Ukrainian Ministry of Emergency Situations in rendering basic support for the most vulnerable people.

The **Macedonian Red Cross Society** has undertaken a few activities to raise awareness of possible health consequences as a result of cold weather, including the preparation and distribution of a flyer in the Macedonian and Albanian languages containing preventive advice on how to protect one's health in such extreme situations, possible health disorders that may appear and first aid actions needed, for example in case of hypothermia and frostbite.

For the homeless and other groups who are particularly vulnerable to the weather conditions, a reception centre for homeless was set up, which is operating at the local Red Cross branch in Skopje, and which is open 24 hours a day. The Red Cross is also providing support by mobile teams deployed on the territory.

The **Red Cross Society of Serbia**, supported by the IFRC's Country Representation in Belgrade, is now closely following the situation in the 16 municipalities where a state of emergency has been declared: so far, 650 families have been identified by the Red Cross branches as those in need of assistance. The effort is underway to reach these families with canned food, warm winter clothes, boots, gloves, blankets, candles and family hygiene parcels. As soon as the roads are cleared, the prepositioned relief assistance at these branches will be distributed to the beneficiaries. As another example of assisting the most vulnerable in these extremely harsh conditions, the Red Cross branch in Bačka Topola, North Bačka District of Vojvodina,

has made its facilities available to the local homeless to protect themselves from the cold. Other local branches are carefully monitoring the situations in their municipalities and will do the same if needed.

In Poland, where the temperature sunk to minus 30 degrees and five people were reported dead of hypothermia in the last two days, bringing the death toll from the cold to 15, the **Polish Red Cross Society** in the west-central part of the country has opened a reception centre for homeless people. With a capacity of 59 beds, the venue is now hosting over 65, as more and more are arriving.

The local police force is searching gardens and narrow streets in the town of Konin to find the homeless and offer them safe and warm shelter at a Polish Red Cross hostel. The reception centre is receiving strong support from local citizens, who are contributing blankets, bedding and warm clothes, and from the local food bank, which cooperates with the Polish Red Cross branch in providing daily hot meals.

The volunteers and staff of **Bulgarian Red Cross Society**, in cooperation with the national Fire Brigade and Civil Protection Authority, are assisting the people in need; a monitoring and coordination system was activated in the Bulgarian National Society and a 24/7 contact was established with all structures on the territory. Hot drinks are being distributed to the people in the affected areas by Red Cross volunteers and staff at special distribution points in cities and villages, as well as to passing truck drivers held up on the blocked roads. In some branches in north-eastern Bulgaria, crisis centres were opened to support homeless people and those stuck on the road. In general, the situation remains extreme, also because of the freshly fallen snow of the last two days. All regional branches of the Bulgarian Red Cross Society remain in alert and are ready to respond if the situation further deteriorates.

Also northern and central Italy have been hit by the cold snap of the last days: from north to south, **Italian Red Cross Society** volunteers and staff are intensifying their efforts particularly in support of the homeless and the elderly people. 150 volunteers were deployed in the region of Emilia Romagna alone, with 45 vehicles; while in Piedmont 50 places were made available at the Red Cross reception centre in Turin. In Rome, the local Emergency Operations Room is now open, serviced by some 30 volunteers who are working on providing basic needs, tea and blankets to homeless people in the capital. The Red Cross Provincial branch in Milan, for 11 years active in supporting people of no fixed abode through its project "the Red Cross for the *clochard*" has reinforced its four street units.

## Contact information

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All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) in Disaster Relief and the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (Sphere) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable.

The IFRC's vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.

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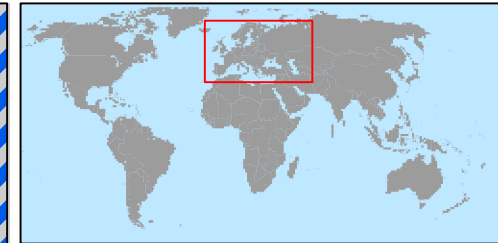
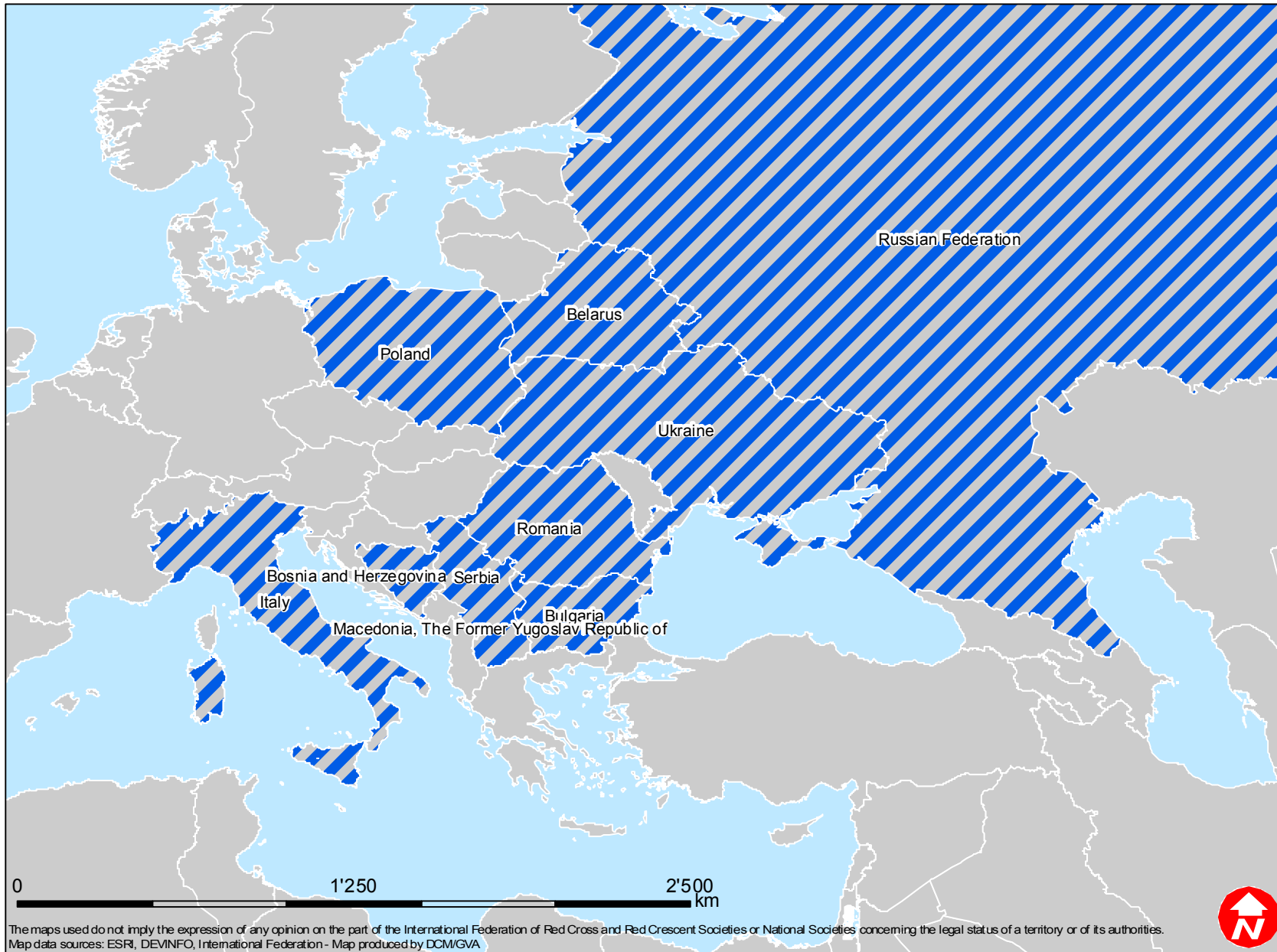



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1. Save lives, protect livelihoods, and strengthen recovery from disaster and crises.
  2. Enable healthy and safe living.
  3. Promote social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace.
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## Europe: Severe winter conditions



 Affected countries

