

COLOMBIA: EARTHQUAKE

10 Feb. 1999

Joint Federation/ICRC Appeal

appeal no.04/99

situation report no. 2

period covered: 31 January - 8 February

The delivery and distribution of food and relief items has improved. Assessments carried out during this period have resulted in more detailed information to be used in a revised Appeal. The excellent collaboration between the Columbia Red Cross Society (CRCS), the International Federation, and the ICRC provides a solid example of how the Movement can respond in a timely and effective manner.

The context

A powerful earthquake struck western Colombia on 25 January, at 13.19 hours local time (18.19 GMT). The quake registered 6 on the Richter scale, and was followed by a number of strong aftershocks. The affected area is in the coffee-growing region of the Andean mountains, and has a total population of three million. Armenia, the capital of Quindio province, was worst hit, but the disaster area extends across five provinces, and includes 20 towns. The current number of victims is 907 dead, with 4,179 injured. 35,000 homes are totally or partially damaged. The ICRC and the Federation launched a preliminary Appeal on 28 January, 1998 for CHF 11,700,000 to provide assistance to some 200,000 beneficiaries.

Latest events

Some 80 after shocks registering between 2 and 4 on the Richter scale have hit the region since 25 January. On 5 February a shock of 3.4 shook the area, and one of 2.9 was registered on 6 February.

Following initial difficulties in distributing emergency relief and food supplies, Military Police were deployed in the disaster zone to maintain order. With the help of 300 Red Cross volunteers and staff who are currently in the disaster zone and 200 more are currently supporting the operation in Bogota, the distribution system has now become more effective.

Several government ministries and agencies have been involved in the relief operation. The National Agency for the Prevention and Response to Disasters had the task of leading and co-ordinating relief actions, but was quickly overwhelmed by the size of the disaster and requested assistance from the CRCS. The Ministry of Health was heavily involved with support to hospitals and clinics. The Provincial government's Regional Disaster Preparedness and Relief Committees have assisted the municipal committees in seeking funds and in collecting, transporting, and distributing relief supplies in the disaster stricken areas. The National Fund for Disasters has been active in assessing the damage in order to fund rehabilitation.

The Colombian Government has also negotiated credits with the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank in order to re-establish water and sewage systems and to preserve the environment in the disaster zone. The Government and the National Federation of Coffee Growers have established a fund with soft loans to reconstruct houses, schools, the water system, and the electrical system. The Government is preparing to set up a task force to monitor funds and reconstruction.

Several UN agencies are also involved, including WFP which has pledged to feed 115,000 persons during the next 6 months at a cost of USD 4.4 million, and UNICEF which is addressing the prevention of epidemics with the provision of portable latrines including maintenance service and has distributed to families basic survival kits. UNICEF will also distribute school materials to assist children to return to a normal life as soon as possible. The Colombian Red Cross psychological support programme for children is also co-ordinated with UNICEF.

Medicins sans Frontieres has worked and continues to be active in the provision of medical attention, the distribution of medical supplies to hospitals, the provision of temporary shelters, and the distribution of water and basic food and non food supplies.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

During the emergency, the CRCS evaluated the damage and assessed the needs for search and rescue, first aid, evacuation from areas of risk, tracing, provision of relief supplies in cooperation with the official government agencies responsible for bringing aid to the victims. The ICRC participated in this evaluation phase by providing personnel consisting of 1 relief delegate, 1 medical doctor, vehicles and CHF 28,000 for this part of the operation.

The Colombian Red Cross considers its most valuable support was the fast mobilising of 500 volunteers in the area from the three branches of Tolima, Quindio, and Risaralda. CHF 238,000 worth of relief materials consisting of 10,000 mattresses, 7,000 sheets, 10,000 blankets, 3,500 kitchen sets, and 10,000 hygiene kits were released from ICRC stocks to the CRCS for immediate distribution. The Colombian Red Cross has distributed this material and exhausted its stocks and now immediately needs to purchase large replenishment amounts of relief supplies.

With the total break down in the communications system, the CRCS provided radio communications equipment in order to maintain contact and coordinate the operations. The CRCS also took the lead role in co-ordinating tracing, clearing access to the area, rescuing the injured and removing the dead buried under the rubble. In order to gain access to the disaster zone, the CRCS assembled a large fleet of vehicles. Emergency first aid posts to treat the injured were also set up, as well as transportation of the more seriously injured to hospitals.

A total of 1,000 MT of relief items have been sent from Bogota and local branches, consisting of food, water, mattresses, sheets, blankets, personal hygiene kits, cooking sets, tents, plastic sheeting and medicines. The supplies have been brought to 15 Red Cross operational distribution centres and 15 government centres.

A total of 6,193 tracing inquiries have been received. Of these, 999 cases have been resolved, including 5 family re-unifications.

The Spanish Red Cross, with ECHO funding, is distributing food items, emergency kits, and water. Two delegates arrived on 3 March and will remain for 3 months.

The French Red Cross has assisted the CRCS with distribution, emergency kits, surgical material and co-operates in Psychological Support.

The German Red Cross will provide two 10-ton Mercedes-Benz trucks, as well as 500 tents and 10,000 blankets by air.

The Japanese Red Cross, in co-operation with the CRCS, is carrying out a post emergency health assessment.

The ICRC evaluated the situation in three prisons located in the affected area of Armenia and Calarcá. The ICRC presence helped to calm the situation, and together with the authorities organised the transfer of the majority of the detainees to safer places. The detainees were relieved to learn that they had not been forgotten or overlooked. The remaining detainees received first aid, water, and hygiene materials. 144 Red Cross messages were transmitted between the detainees, the prison personnel, and their respective families. The CRCS assisted in these various activities.

Outstanding needs

Food packages for 20,000 families for 3 months and non-food items (100,000 blankets, 100,000 personal hygiene kits, 15,000 cooking sets, and 10,000 lanterns with batteries) are all still urgently required, as well as shelter (1,000 pre-fabricated homes). Assistance in health education programmes (in order to avoid epidemics) and psychological support (especially to children) is also a priority.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The CRCS, the Federation, and the ICRC and have been co-ordinating efforts with various government agencies, specifically the National Agency for the Prevention and Response to Disasters, the Ministry of Health, the Regional Disaster Preparedness and Relief Committees, and the National Fund for Disasters.

Efforts have also been made to coordinate with UN agencies (UNDP, and UNICEF) as well as with operational NGO's (Medicins sans Frontieres).

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The initial difficulties in distributing relief supplies have now been resolved, and the emergency response operation is now meeting the urgent needs more effectively. Cash contributions continue to be the most effective way of assisting the victims, and donors are encouraged to support the operation in this way.

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