

COLOMBIA: EARTHQUAKE

07 May 1999

Joint Federation/ICRC Appeal

appeal no. 04/99

situation report no. 03

period covered: 8th February - 25th April, 1999

While support to earthquake victims, and particularly the homeless, continues, the operation is now turning towards disaster preparedness, reinforcement of systems and rehabilitation. Initial steps have been taken, including community training initiatives, but major reconstruction projects of community buildings and Red Cross facilities are held up pending seismic studies and building permit clearances.

The context

On 25th January 1999, the worst earthquake in 16 years, measuring 6 on the Richter scale, struck a mountainous region bordering five provinces (Quindio, Risaralda, Tolima, Valle del Cauca and Caldas) in the west-central part of Colombia's coffee growing areas. Four strong aftershocks, including one registering 5.6 on the Richter scale, occurred four hours after the main quake. Among the 28 towns that were affected, Armenia, the provincial capital of Quindio, was the worst hit.

Official reports indicate that altogether 1,186 people died and 8,563 were injured. According to a Colombian Government census in March, 35,972 houses were destroyed and 43,476 damaged. A total of 90,474 families are registered as homeless; 158,918 persons from this group are living in camps or tents or in provisional shelters in parks, sports fields or in the streets in front of what used to be their homes. Almost all schools were damaged or destroyed, along with many hospitals and health centres.

Latest events

The Government declared a national state of economic and social emergency and a national co-ordinator was appointed in the President's Office, mandated to establish a thorough and transparent control system for the rehabilitation and reconstruction process. Subsidies will be granted for the reconstruction of houses, and credit will be given to boost economic activities. For this purpose USD 200 million from the Central Bank and USD 300 million from the World Bank/IDB have been made available.

Reconstruction is progressing very slowly. A detailed assessment of the area is not expected to be ready until June or July. Documentation on ownership of land and buildings is complicated and requires time, while funds allocated by the Government are not immediately available. According to the latest statistics, unemployment in the area has risen to an alarming 38% due to losses in the agricultural and agro-industrial sector and the forced closing of businesses. The recent coffee harvest declined by 25%, partly because of heavy rains. The area has also been affected by the overall worsening economic situation in the country: economic growth in Colombia was negative in the first quarter of this year.

One of the sectors that has suffered most is education, not only due to the number of schools affected, but also to the extent of the damage, largely attributable to non-compliance with construction norms. The University of Quindio in Armenia and the University of Technology in Pereira were also affected as were most of the many technical schools in the region.

The health sector also suffered, although to a lesser degree. According to the Ministry of Health, 61 clinics and hospitals were damaged, eight of which will have to be completely demolished.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

During the emergency phase the Colombian Red Cross, acting as an auxiliary to the Government, set up a search and rescue operation, evacuated families, gave first aid, transferred the injured to hospital, distributed relief supplies and established a tracing service. It was assisted by the ICRC Delegation in Bogota, which made supplies and logistics available. The ICRC continues as the lead agency for activities related to the armed conflict in Colombia.

A total of 750 Red Cross staff and volunteers were working in the relief operation at the outset. As the situation stabilised the number was reduced by 50%. From 25th April onwards, 240 persons, of whom 180 are volunteers, are engaged daily in the operation.

Feeding programmes and other relief distributions •

Feeding programmes carried out in cooperation with the Government are oriented toward shelters and will continue until 15th May, when a new system centred on school feeding programmes will replace the present one. The distribution of blankets, kitchen utensils, personal hygiene kits and drinking water continues, as does co-operation with, and counselling of the local authorities in the administration of temporary shelters and in logistics.

During the emergency phase from 25th January - 4th February, 1.500 tons of food and non-food items were distributed. Conditions were such in the first 4 days of the emergency that it was not possible to record the number of beneficiaries. However, from 29th January - 4th February, 18,500 family food parcels at 12,5 kgs. were distributed together with a number of unrecorded donations, assisting a total of approximately 72,500 victims in the departments of Quindio and Risaralda.

From 5th February - 31st March a total of 172,250 persons were supplied with food parcels, kitchen sets, personal hygiene kits, clothes, sheets and blankets, mattresses, plastic sheeting, tools and medicines. During the same period 317 family tents were set up.

Medical and Psychological Support Services •

During the second phase a psychological support programme was carried out by staff and volunteers of the Colombian Red Cross among children in the camps and temporary shelters and in the most vulnerable communities. Medical support included vaccination programmes, oral health and prevention and treatment of diarrhoea, skin and respiratory diseases.

Reinforcement of systems •

When it became evident that the lack of a uniform system for registering food and non-food items entering Red Cross warehouses and their subsequent distribution to victims was preventing the efficient compilation of data, two persons were assigned to visit the Red Cross branches of the area and, using

the available information, to reconstruct the records and create a consolidated report. A new computerised registration system was subsequently created and the warehouse managers trained in its use.

A Federation telecommunications delegate visited the area and advised on measures to be taken in order to improve the telecommunications system. An ICRC delegate assisted the Red Cross branch of Quindio for three months in the distribution of food and non-food items.

Because the region, although highly vulnerable, is not prepared or equipped to respond to disasters, the Colombian Red Cross conducted courses in April in first aid, basic health care, administration of shelters, search and rescue and logistics. Participants included staff from the fire brigade, the police, the armed forces, the civil defence, community leaders, government officials and Red Cross volunteers.

Tracing Service •

One of the most visible successes of the second phase of the operation has been the Tracing Service. Volunteers have visited hospitals, shelters, communities, prisons and remote areas by foot, bicycle, motorbike and car, often having to walk long distances or negotiate difficult terrain in their search for missing persons.

Today the Tracing Service continues, but the number of volunteers has been reduced to seven as the number of inquiries diminishes and the rate of resolved cases grows. As of 25th April, a total of 10,228 inquiries had been received, of which 8,217 cases were resolved.

Public information •

An eight-minute video produced just after the emergency phase and giving an excellent picture of the work of the Red Cross will be sent to donors in the next few days.

Despite the pressures on the National Society and its staff, CRC programmes continue and suffered only slightly during the first and most hectic weeks of the earthquake operation.

Outstanding needs

On 22 March the appeal was extended to include a comprehensive rehabilitation phase, lasting for 12 months, assisting 200,000 people, and bringing the total amount sought by the appeal to CHF 16,382,000. Rehabilitation projects included community welfare programmes, the reconstruction or repair of houses, schools and health centres, the strengthening of the capacities of the community emergency system, including the Red Cross branches and all the partners within the National Emergency System, and the consolidation of the disaster preparedness system. The projects were prepared by the Colombian Red Cross based on its experience in the initial phases of this disaster and its analysis of what the area requires to respond better to future emergencies. Some are intended to restore Red Cross facilities damaged by the quake.

Although a number of National Societies have requested more detailed information on the projects, so far few firm pledges have been received. Yet the continuation of assistance into the rehabilitation phase is a vital part of the operation, and funding must continue if the area is to stand any chance of recovery. Colombia has the necessary human resources and goods to implement these projects, but needs support in the form of cash contributions.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Co-operation with government offices and entities has been excellent and continues into the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase. The Federation liaison delegate acts as a co-ordinator between

the Colombian Red Cross, the Federation, the National Societies and other international organisations and NGOs.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Thanks to support from all components of the Movement, the first and second phase of the operation have been carried out with efficiency and transparency, and according to the Movement's principles.

Reconstruction and rehabilitation of the area is now a matter of urgency. The programmes outlined in the appeal have been designed to assist the victims and the communities rebuild their lives, re-establish the social fabric and at the same time ensure that this highly vulnerable area is better prepared and equipped to respond to future disasters. The Colombian Red Cross is relying on the solidarity of Red Cross sister societies to help it carry out this task.

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