

COLOMBIA: EARTHQUAKE RELIEF AND REHABILITATION

04 August 1999

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period covered: 26 April - 31 July 1999

Joint Federation/ICRC appeal

While material and psychological support to homeless people still living in shelters is continuing, the rehabilitation phase is getting under way, following the recent release of funds by some donors. Projects include a bank of building tools and materials and radio and computer equipment for local Red Cross emergency aid centres.

The context

On 25 January 1999, an earthquake 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 affected, Armenia, the provincial capital of Quindio, was the worst hit.

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 were registered as homeless; today, 158,918 persons from this group are still living in camps or individual tents or in provisional shelters in parks and sports fields or in the streets. Almost all school buildings were damaged or destroyed, along with many hospitals and health centres.

Latest events

At the very beginning of the emergency, the Colombian Government appointed a national co-ordinator for the fund for the reconstruction of the coffee growing zone (Fondo para la Reconstrucción del Eje Cafetero -- FOREC), in order to establish a thorough and transparent control and co-ordination system for the rehabilitation and reconstruction process. Recently, approximately USD 5 million, from 120

bank accounts opened by private persons or entities in Colombia to help the victims of the earthquake, was handed over to FOREC.

The economic situation in the country has worsened during the last two months. The unemployment rate has risen to 20.5% and continues to be much higher in the coffee growing area than in the rest of the country. The Colombian peso has weakened drastically and the cost of living, including prices of building materials, has gone up. The recent coffee harvest was low not only because of heavy rains but also because the smaller coffee growers hit by the earthquake and its economic consequences did not have the money to buy fertilisers.

The Colombian Red Cross has asked its branches in the area as far as possible to purchase all goods and material locally in order to help stimulate the local economy.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Feeding and basic needs programmes •

The Colombian Red Cross continues to distribute food, clothes, blankets, sheets and mattresses, plus supplementary food for young children and nursing mothers, in shelters for the homeless.

Medical and Psychological Support Services •

The primary health care programmes continue. A mobile oral health team composed of two dentists, an oral hygienist and volunteers will provide services in the disaster affected communities until the end of July. Educational and recreational programmes continue to be carried out by volunteers of the Colombian Red Cross for youth and children living in the temporary shelters, an important component of which is "peaceful coexistence". Medical and psychological care is being maintained in the shelters together with distributions of personal hygiene kits.

Telecommunications and office equipment •

Eighteen VHF radios and four HF radios have been installed in the Operational Units (emergency co-ordination centres) of the Colombian Red Cross. Fifteen Operational Units have also been furnished with basic office equipment and a computer with disaster management software.

Tracing Services •

On 6 May the Disaster Tracing Programme in the earthquake area was closed: it received 10,228 enquiries and resolved 8,217 cases.

Public Information •

A folder in Spanish and English covering the work of the Colombian Red Cross in the disaster area from 25 January - 30 June will be distributed to donors in August.

Projects •

The co-ordination, control and execution of the projects of the third phase is done by the Red Cross branches of the area and the relevant NHQ department, while the administration is controlled by the National Headquarters. Firm commitments of funds from National Societies in the last few weeks have made it possible to start the detailed planning of some of the rehabilitation programmes presented in the appeal.

Some projects have already begun:

- ◆ A building materials bank to help communities repair and reconstruct damaged houses is operational. Earlier this month a pilot project for 50 houses started in Montenegro and materials for 150 houses are in the pipeline in Quimbaya. As of August a sociologist will start working with the communities.
- ◆ The roof of the Pereira Red Cross has been repaired. The stabilisation of the slope behind the building now only needs the Municipality's plan of action for the families with houses built on the slope.

The ICRC continues to monitor the situation in Calarca prison, which was seriously damaged and where the detention conditions are still critical. In addition to a first assistance distributed during the emergency period, the ICRC now foresees to provide also educational / recreative material and hygiene kits for the detainees.

Outstanding needs

National Societies who requested detailed information on projects some time ago have only recently decided which projects they are willing to support. Financial support, enabling assistance to extend into the rehabilitation phase is a vital part of the operation, and must continue if the area is to stand any chance of a speedy recovery. Colombia has the necessary human resources and goods to implement these projects, but needs assistance in the form of cash contributions.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Excellent co-operation with government offices and local entities continues. The Federation delegate acts as a co-ordinator between the Colombian Red Cross, the Federation, participating National Societies and other international organisations and NGOs.

At the end of May, the first contracts between the government and local NGOs were signed, chiefly for reconstruction in the municipalities of La Tebaida and Montenegro. Projects are expected to start in August.

The World Food Programme has chosen the Federation of Coffee Growers and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) as counterparts in the food distribution in 60 community kitchens in the temporary shelters. The Colombian Red Cross co-operates with ICBF in the community kitchens. MDPL (El Movimiento para la Paz, el Desarme y la Libertad) is working in the temporary shelters in the municipality of Circasia and also has a housing project for 900 families in the town.

The World Food Programme is assisting with reconstruction activities that focus on productive infrastructure and dwellings and Habitat for Humanity is co-operating with the authorities with regard to urban reconstruction in all of the affected municipalities. Oxfam, World Vision and the NGO Antioquia Presente will help 500 families in Armenia reconstruct their houses, through a tools bank.

UNICEF, which worked alongside the Colombian Red Cross in psychological counselling during the post emergency phase, is working in the area of the psycho-social rehabilitation of traumatised children. Medecins sans Frontières is working in the same area, but in schools, where they train teachers in identifying and counselling traumatised children. Medicos del Mundo are present in the hospitals and PAHO/WHO has provided support for the re-establishment of the health services and for emergency vaccinations.

Prevention of Disasters: the UN system plans to strengthen the local and regional capacities in the area. A 6 months' training programme for school teachers is being implemented.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The all-important rehabilitation phase, which will help the region get back on its feet, is slowly gaining momentum, now that projects are being chosen by donors and funds released. Donors holding funds are urged to release them rapidly, so that rehabilitation can be completed within the scheduled timeframe of 12 months..

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