

COLOMBIA EARTHQUAKE

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Joint Federation/ICRC appeal

Working closely with the government co-ordinating body and NGOs the Colombian Red Cross has completed or is close to completing most of its numerous rehabilitation projects. Because of the rigorous geological surveys of sites, some rebuilding has been delayed, but this, too, is now moving ahead.

The context

On 25 January 1999, an earthquake registering 6 on the Richter scale struck a mountainous region in the west-central part of Colombia's coffee growing area, one of the country's most developed regions. Scores of strong aftershocks followed. Among the 28 towns that were affected, Armenia, the provincial capital of Quindio, was the worst hit.

Official figures for the disaster are 1,186 deaths and 8,563 injuries. According to the Colombian Government census 35,972 houses were destroyed and 43,476 damaged. A total of 90,474 families were registered as homeless of which 35% were accommodated in camps or tents, or in provisional shelters in parks, sports fields, or in the streets. Almost all the schools were damaged or destroyed, along with many hospitals and health centres.

Latest events

The Government-appointed national co-ordinating body, FOREC (The Foundation for the Reconstruction of the Coffee Region) continues to control and coordinate the rehabilitation and reconstruction process. NGOs were invited to take responsibility for the rehabilitation of individual municipalities and to present a plan of action and a budget. In August agreements were signed with 32 NGOs, each responsible for one municipality.

The geological study to determine where it is safe to build and re-build has taken longer than expected, and the works have subsequently been delayed. The earthquake victims are becoming impatient but the government is insistent that safety of sites must be established.

During the last couple of months, however, house building has speeded up: 80,000 loans have been approved to house or site owners who can prove their ownership. However, around 50,000 persons still

live in temporary shelters, the majority of them former tenants. Low cost housing schemes are under construction to meet the needs of some of this group.

The Colombian Government and FOREC consider that one and a half years more are needed to ensure housing for everybody.

Since September 1999 the provinces of Risaralda, Valle, Quindio and Caldas have suffered from continuous rains which have led to floods and landslides and caused the evacuation of 2,500 persons. Fires have also broken out in the temporary shelters, affecting 150 families.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Of the 28 projects presented by the Colombian Red Cross for the reconstruction phase, 18 have so far received funding, while pledges for some of the remaining projects have been announced. The Colombian Red Cross had originally planned to finish the rehabilitation phase in December 1999, but got off to a late start, due to the delay of the geological study mentioned above and delays in signing agreements with the governmental bodies responsible for health and education. The completion of this phase therefore has to be postponed until April-May 2000. However, most of the projects related to community education and strengthening of the Red Cross Municipal Units have already been carried out, or are about to finish.

Rehabilitation Programmes •

The Colombian Red Cross, with the full participation of the communities involved and the local authorities, is helping to improve living conditions and restore health and education services for the earthquake victims. Health education and educational activities for children and young people are part of this process.

Education and reconstruction of schools

Volunteers have been trained in teaching the PACO (Peace, Action and Coexistence) concept. This programme, which aims at creating community leaders and re-establishing the social fabric, has just begun. The first tangible result is the repair of a damaged community centre in which the community itself, led by Red Cross volunteers, played a major role. The repair of another five community centres and 15 recreational centres is underway.

A project to teach environmental protection began end December. Material has been purchased and 32 trainers educated as multipliers to work in ten communities. The trainers will teach waste management, and water and forest protection, in connection with health campaigns.

Six rural schools are being reconstructed and will be finished this month (February).

Reconstruction of Health Centres and Health Education

The reconstruction of 13 health centres in all five departments is progressing and three have already been finished.

The Orthopaedic Appliances Bank was initiated in mid-September. Personnel has been selected and training, co-ordination with branches and local health authorities has been carried out. The areas in which the Red Cross will work have been identified.

The Colombian Red Cross health department is planning the implementation of the Primary Health Care project.

Psychological and Social Support

The tracing network will carry out two workshops in February to strengthen its system.

Support for Reconstruction of Houses

This project has become a self-help project in which the whole community participates: of 36 houses, 12 have been transferred to their owners, while the remaining 24 are close to completion. An additional 200 houses will be built in six municipalities.

Rehabilitation of the Red Cross System •

After the earthquake, local Red Cross branches played an important role in disaster response. However, some of their buildings suffered serious damage. In order to restore and consolidate their capacity and their human resources, the branches and the municipal operational units in the earthquake prone region need to be strengthened.

Repairing and reconstruction of branches

After the earthquake and the heavy rains, the slope behind the Pereira Red Cross was destabilised, threatening the 200 persons living below it. The slope has been secured and health and community education has been undertaken in the community.

The architect has been selected for the reconstruction of the Red Cross health centre in Armenia and the warehouse. The plans will soon be presented to the Red Cross and the Municipality for approval.

Volunteer Welfare

The Autonomous University of Manizales carried out a socio-economic study of the volunteers affected by the earthquake. It recommended economic assistance for rebuilding the volunteers' damaged houses, and educational grants for volunteers. So far 35 of the 190 eligible volunteers have been assisted in Quindio and Risaralda.

Equipment and infrastructure

Eighteen Municipal Operational Units have been rehabilitated and furnished with basic office and telecommunications equipment. Another ten units have received basic medical supplies.

The warehouses in two municipalities have been rebuilt. Two more warehouses have been purchased and adapted.

Reinforcement of the disaster preparedness system •

The region is very vulnerable to seismic and other natural disasters. In order to prepare for future events and to be able to save lives, the Colombian Red Cross is strengthening the disaster preparedness system in the region. An essential element is the education and organisation of the communities themselves.

Consolidation of Disaster Response System

Sixty workshops in community education and first aid have been carried out in 19 municipalities in the affected area, with the participation of 1,420 persons.

Branch co-ordinators have been selected for training in community preparedness and disaster prevention. Work groups have been established and educational material prepared. The workshops will take place in April.

Twenty-six educational brigades have worked in schools and educational centres in the affected area where children and youth have been trained in disaster prevention. Activities to improve their relationship with peers were also introduced.

Workshops have been held on hospital security in 32 hospitals and health centres. Educational material was distributed and signposting installed.

Twenty-five workshops on emergency planning have been held for Red Cross branches and Municipal Operative Units. The remaining nine workshops will take place this month (February).

The Colombian Red Cross medical department is working on the implementation of the medical care in disaster situations project.

Outstanding needs

Almost one year after the earthquake, children are still attending classes in tents. The Colombian Red Cross remains interested in rebuilding schools in the rural areas, but has not received funds. The Society wants to increase the numbers of persons trained as trainers in disaster prevention and community education in high risk urban areas and the numbers of rural brigades trained in emergency care and first aid. It has the capacity, methodology and experience to extend these programmes further.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Projects are presented to the local government for approval and are co-ordinated with the NGO responsible for the municipality. The Colombian Red Cross participates in meetings with FOREC and keeps this organisation informed about its projects. It also keeps the public informed through press releases, exhibitions in commercial centres, videos and posters in the areas where it is working. A pamphlet, in English and Spanish, on the work of the Colombian Red Cross in the earthquake area has been mailed to National Societies, Embassies, NGOs, and private and public enterprises that responded to the Appeal.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Reconstruction is progressing slowly but steadily. The Colombian Red Cross is playing an important role in rebuilding and rehabilitation, assisted financially with funds raised through the Appeal. Most of the Red Cross projects have been funded and are being implemented. However, because the region is disaster prone, the Colombian Red Cross also considers it important to train more urban and rural communities in disaster prevention and first aid.

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