

# **COLOMBIA: EARTHQUAKE**

2 February 1999

## **Joint Federation/ICRC appeal**

*Appeal no. 04/99*

*Situation report no. 01*

*Period covered: 26 -31 January*

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*The Colombian Red Cross has ended the search and rescue phase of its relief operation and is now expediting the delivery and distribution of relief items in the disaster zone and in particular in Armenia, the worst hit town. At the same time it is continuing needs assessments in the stricken towns and villages and hopes to present a detailed appeal by the end of the week.*

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## ***The context***

An earthquake measuring 6 on the Richter scale struck the Andean region of western Colombia on Monday 25 January. Towns and villages throughout the area have been badly damaged, with up to 80 per cent of buildings destroyed. The worst-hit town is Armenia, capital of Quindio province, and Pereira. Altogether, up to 200,000 people are estimated to have been left homeless.

Aftershocks continue to be felt in the area. Sporadic heavy rains slowed down the movement of relief goods, and forced the reclosing of the two airports serving the disaster area. Some roads into the area are still impracticable.

## ***Latest events***

The Colombian Red Cross (CRC) announced on Friday that it was ending the search and rescue phase of its relief operation. In the five days after the quake the CRC teams brought out 32 people alive from the rubble and extracted 215 bodies. The latest casualty figures, according to the National Society, are: 4,117 injured and 938 dead. Of these, 536 dead and 1,714 injured were in Armenia.

Looting of shops and department stores in Armenia which began midweek peaked on Friday, when crowds stormed the Colombian Red Cross warehouse. To defuse the situation local Red Cross workers opened up the stores, and the looters made off with some of the supplies. The incident was over within a few minutes. It was difficult to identify who the looters were, but there is widespread speculation that they were out of town people taking advantage of the situation, and not local earthquake victims.

Following this and other security incidents the government reinforced the military presence throughout the disaster area.

The traffic gridlock in Armenia, caused by townspeople trying to leave and others trying to get in to look for relatives and friends, has been absorbed.

Although needs assessments are still in progress, some emergency needs have already been met.

- ◆ The Colombian Red Cross National Blood Centre in Bogota has sufficient blood reserves (1,357 units in hand).
- ◆ Tents are no longer needed, in view of the availability of more than enough for the estimated needs.
- ◆ Safe water is available in the area, although distribution still has to be improved.

The distribution of relief supplies and on the spot co-ordination, the current priority now that search and rescue operations are over, is the responsibility of the "national solidarity network" which comes under the authority of the Office of the President of the Republic.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent action***

Currently the CRC has 795 workers in the disaster zone and 300 staff and volunteers working on the operation in Bogota.

- **Food and non-food distributions**

The CRC distributed more than 300 metric tons of food in the first five days after the quake to thousands of beneficiaries. Goods included beans, oil, milk, lentils, rice and tinned foods. It has another three tons of food, donated by local companies, in the pipeline.

To expedite relief deliveries, the CRC has put in place a food and non-food distribution system, in co-ordination with the central government. Two centres are being opened in Armenia, one in the local CRC headquarters, the other in a government warehouse. The centres will serve as staging posts for relief goods, forwarding them to distribution points in the town and in nearby quake-affected communities, where distributions will be carried out by Red Cross, community leaders, aid organisations and local authorities. Goods will be sorted and labelled in Bogota, to speed up handling in the disaster zone.

Many of the supplies will be transported on the air-shuttle set up by the CRC, a daily charter flight servicing Bogota-Armenia-Pereira-Bogota. The National Society is also despatching 16 lorries to the area.

- **Tracing enquiries**

The CRC has reinforced its tracing service and established an e-mail address for all quake-related enquiries: [scrcol@coll.telecom.com.co](mailto:scrcol@coll.telecom.com.co).

- **Disaster information website**

The CRC is posting information about disaster relief efforts, including the latest figures, on its website: [www.crcol.org.co](http://www.crcol.org.co)

- **Co-ordination**

The Colombian Red Cross is co-ordinating this operation. The Federation, which put a media and information delegate at the disposal of the National Society, is now recruiting a telecommunications delegate to assist the CRC with field communications.

The American Red Cross, French Red Cross, German Red Cross, Japanese Red Cross and Spanish Red Cross have flown relief supplies into Colombia and have personnel in the country.

The ICRC is sending three vehicles to Armenia to reinforce CRC distribution efforts. It assigned three delegates to investigate the situation in the town after the looting incident at the Red Cross warehouse.

## ***Outstanding needs***

The CRC, working with its local branches, is assessing needs in the disaster zone and hopes to present immediate and medium term needs by the end of this week. It has already informed the Secretariat that it will concentrate on the repair of existing houses and community health and social projects and will not venture into the construction of new housing for the homeless, which, past experience has shown, creates social tensions by drawing outsiders into the area.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

The Colombian Red Cross is working in close co-ordination with the government authorities who are co-ordinating the relief operations and with the many participating aid organisations. In a meeting this Monday, Medecins sans Frontières (MSF) shared information on the health situation in four small towns and on their plans for health services, with the CRC National Director of Relief.

The CRC is receiving a steady stream of contributions from individuals, businesses and organisations within the country, which is enabling it to move supplies rapidly into the disaster zone.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details.

## ***Conclusion***

Since all relief supplies can be obtained in Colombia, cash contributions continue to be the most effective way of assisting the earthquake victims.

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