

ERITREA: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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situation report no. 1/2000

period covered: 1 January - 30 June

The recent conflict with Ethiopia has had a considerable impact on the ability of the Red Cross Society of Eritrea (RCSE) to continue its planned development and assistance programmes. The National Society has devoted most of its resources, particularly over the last 2 months, towards providing emergency relief. However, with the current ceasefire in place and peace negotiations continuing, it is anticipated that the National Society, supported by the International Federation and ICRC, will be in a position to initiate development activities again.

The context

Eritrea gained its independence in 1991 after a liberation war that lasted 30 years and left the country as one of the poorest nations in the world, with both its infrastructure and economy in ruins. Almost a decade later Eritrea still ranks among the 10 poorest countries in the world. However a number of health indicators point towards a slow improvement of the overall human development of the country.

Since its independence, Eritrea has been in a process of reconstruction and rehabilitation, for which the country has developed a policy of self reliance rather than counting on foreign relief, assistance or loans. Though positive results are visible in many parts of the country, problems such as poverty, disease, drought and armed conflict continue.

In May 1998, a border conflict with Ethiopia degenerated into a full scale war between the two countries, resulting in thousands of deaths, massive internal displacement, and deportation of tens of thousands of people, with millions more directly or indirectly affected.

Country Assistance Strategy

To respond to the situation, the Federation strategy was formulated in late 1999 to support the key priorities of the Red Cross Society of Eritrea (RCSE), specifically in the areas of organisational development, improving emergency response and disaster preparedness, developing health services, strengthening the ambulance services, and increasing and broadening the volunteer base. The Federation will provide technical support primarily in areas of policy development, resource mobilisation, coordination of the PNSs' input, as well as technical assistance and experience sharing in

various Red Cross Red Crescent activities. The Federation's programme is co-ordinated with the ICRC as well as United Nations agencies.

Latest events

After a brief period of relative peace while negotiations took place, the conflict resumed again on May 12, 2000, resulting in considerable areas of western and southern Eritrea being occupied by Ethiopian armed forces. The renewed conflict provoked a massive displacement of people, especially in the zobas (provinces) of Debub, Gash-Barka and Anseba. Adding to the humanitarian disaster was the severe drought affecting the entire region.

According to recent figures provided by the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC), some 1.6 million people (out of a total population of approx. 3.2 million) are considered in crisis, comprised of 1.1 million war affected, 335,000 drought affected, and 175,000 impacted host communities. Additionally, 150,000 are affected by increased urban poverty due to the conflict situation.

On 18th June, a ceasefire agreement was signed by Ethiopia and Eritrea. The withdrawal of Ethiopian troops is pending agreement and establishment of a security zone, with monitoring provided by a UN peacekeeping force.

A number of internally displaced people have started to move back to their places of origin, in many cases to find their homes looted or destroyed. The situation looks serious also in the long term, as in most of the agricultural areas the planting season for grains is June - mid July. Generally there is a severe shortage of seeds and agricultural tools.

The repatriation of approximately 80,000 Eritrean Refugees living in Sudan is being undertaken by UNHCR and the ERREC.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Disaster Response •

An RCSE and Federation emergency appeal prepared in May to assist 92,000 drought victims was overtaken by events when the recent conflict escalated, resulting in a very high influx of IDP's into the intended operational areas, and ICRC assuming responsibility in accordance with the Seville agreement.

The RCSE has been very active throughout this period of conflict. Volunteers were deployed to assist IDP's fleeing the conflict zones from the west towards safer areas in zoba Anseba, and from the south in zoba Debub. With the deployment of up to 1,000 volunteers, IDP's were assisted with water at points along the road, and for the first days with water, biscuits and bread in two of the IDP settlements. Local financial support for this first phase was obtained from Swiss Disaster Relief and the Danish Embassy. In clinics and hospitals in the two zobas, RCSE First Aiders assisted those in need of medical treatment.

Supported by the ICRC, the RCSE has since been involved in the distribution of non-food items to IDPs (tents, tarpaulins, blankets, jerry cans), safe passage for Ethiopian returnees leaving Eritrea, reception of Eritrean expellees from Ethiopia, tracing, dissemination, and continued assistance at health clinics and hospitals.

Disaster Preparedness •

During late March, a Disaster Preparedness workshop was held in Asmara, with support provided by the Regional Delegation in Nairobi. The workshop was held in close co-ordination with, and with valuable inputs from, the ICRC. The workshop gave valuable new knowledge to the RCSE

headquarters and branch leadership in how to address emergencies and disasters, forming Red Cross action teams and other relevant subjects.

Following the workshop, a disaster preparedness and response unit was set up at the headquarters level, with the intention of setting up structures at strategic branches. Due to the escalation of the conflict, this has not yet been formalised. The disaster response situation has, however, provided a good opportunity and motivation to continue with this important task during the latter half of 2000.

Health •

As an important part of the RCSE four year development strategy (2001 - 2004), the health strategy for the National Society has been extensively discussed during the initial half of the year, both at headquarters and branch levels. The development of a revised health policy will be continued during the coming months, involving First Aid training, establishing First Aid posts, and promotion of the African Red Cross Red Crescent Health Initiative (ARCHI) with community education focusing on:

- promotion of healthy behaviour at the family level; and
- community based health interventions to improve the immediate living conditions.

The implementation of water and sanitation projects have been ongoing throughout the period to the extend possible, except for the last two months in the war affected zobas. Ambulance services have been operational in all zobas throughout the period.

Humanitarian Values •

Information about Red Cross principles and International Humanitarian Law has been given as part of most RCSE training sessions (first-aid, health related capacity building, skills training). A separate session has been given to a group of school teachers in Asmara. Awareness performances have been given by a circus group of young boys and girls.

Tracing activities have been increased during the period, with financial and technical support from the ICRC.

Production, printing and distribution of dissemination materials are being planned, in collaboration with the ICRC.

Capacity Building •

A “Memo of Understanding on the co-operation between the Red Cross Society of Eritrea and its partners” was developed and, after a process of consultations with involved partners, signed by the RCSE, ICRC and the Federation during February and distributed to all involved national societies for signature.

A strategy for recognition of RCSE by its government, and development of governance has been developed and is being followed up. Mainly due to the conflict situation, development in most areas of the strategy still needs to be achieved.

A first draft for RCSE statutes has been developed, and will be further worked upon during the coming period.

An external review of “Community Based Health Development Program - Anseba and Gash-Barka Regions” took place during March. The process involved the participation of representatives for most stakeholders in the regions. The report gave valuable inputs for the coming 4-year development plan.

A computerised financial management system has been identified and acquired for RCSE. Due to the conflict situation, implementation of the system has been delayed. This will be worked upon during the coming months.

Strategies for the coming 4-year development plan have been discussed at headquarters and provincial levels, and will be further developed during July and August.

Outstanding needs

In the present conflict situation, the ICRC has been appealing for and co-ordinating international emergency relief assistance for Eritrea in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Considerable needs remain to be covered for the displaced as well as the drought affected persons in Eritrea with the major agricultural areas of Eritrea directly affected by the recent fighting, food shortages must be expected to remain a major problem in the coming 16-18 months and the Red Cross Movement will have to remain ready to intervene should there be a need to complement the assistance provided by the World Food Programme.

For the development activities of the RCSE, almost 80% of the budgeted funding needs for this year are covered with available contributions and pledges. Revised plans of action/budgets will be finalized by the end of July for the remainder of 2000.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Close contacts have been maintained with the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC) and relevant government ministries.

The RCSE, the Federation, and the ICRC are members of the National War Emergency Co-ordination Group, consisting of ERREC, relevant line ministries, UN, foreign embassy/consulate representatives and NGO's, meeting regularly on a weekly basis.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

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