

INFORMATION BULLETIN



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

BELARUS: VISITING NURSES CRISIS 2 December, 2002

Information Bulletin N° 1

This Bulletin is being issued based on the needs described below reflecting the information available at this time. The total amount required to cover the specific needs is approximately CHF 90,000. The Federation's Secretariat requests that contributions be directed to the Belarus Red Cross via the Federation's Minsk delegation bank account. If donors require additional information or clarification in this regard, the Federation's Secretariat is available to advise and assist.

The Situation

The economic situation in Belarus remains extremely serious, with very little hope of any improvement in the near future. Dramatic increases in poverty, homelessness and illnesses including TB, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) are creating larger numbers of vulnerable populations in Belarus. The health system is unable to meet the needs of highly vulnerable groups of population. An increasing number of the elderly need constant special care at home or in social institutions. Increasingly more people are facing serious hardship and are requesting the Belarus Red Cross (BRC) for assistance.

The Visiting Nurses Service (VNS) is a priority service of the BRC, designed to respond to the health and social consequences of poverty, challenges faced by a lack of social-welfare services for the elderly, negative effects of the Chernobyl disaster, as well as an increase in HIV and TB incidence. The VNS also represents a significant part of the identity of BRC. Throughout all the years of economic dislocation, the BRC visiting nurses have been providing vital assistance to the most vulnerable thus filling the gaps in state health and social services. For many of the beneficiaries, survival would be impossible without the daily visits of a Red Cross nurse who is the only link with the outside world. Visiting nurses provide medical care and company to the lone elderly, handicapped and bedridden patients, but also assist with daily chores such as cooking, cleaning and shopping.

However, a full self-reliance of the VNS is not yet achievable in the context of deteriorating social-economic conditions in Belarus. Continuous efforts to explore alternative funding has resulted in an increased number of nurse positions paid from other sources (local authorities, local donations, enterprises, bilateral international contacts). Over the past five years and until recently, the majority of 450 Red Cross nurses have been subsidised by the Government. Similar financial support was expected to be received in 2002. Unfortunately, on 10 November 2002, the BRC received a negative response to this request, despite the excellent reputation of this traditional Red Cross service. This puts the National Society in a potentially disastrous situation.

Throughout the year, the BRC Health Department continued to provide support to the most vulnerable through its network of the nurses, on the assumption that the pledged government funding would materialise. The salaries were not paid as a result, expecting that the nurses would be fully compensated for their services, once the funds were received by the National Society.

Given this short notice decision from the government not to grant the funds, the BRC as the legal employer, has to immediately terminate 250 nurse positions, with an obligation to provide payment of a three-month

compensation (severance pay). It is considered a tragedy to lose such dedicated and well-trained nurses, who also represent the flagship service of the Red Cross Society in Belarus.

The obligation to pay compensation, as well as outstanding wages of up to six months (on average) has created liabilities amounting to USD 60,000. This far exceeds the BRC's available financial resources. And while it may seem a relatively small amount, if it is not paid by the end of 2002 the implications for the National Society will be grave, including the risk of bankruptcy of Red Cross branches, as well as the seizure of assets by the authorities.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Belarus Red Cross has throughout this year taken action to obtain alternative funding for the nurses programme. The National Society's fundraising efforts resulted in the ability to independently fund 150 nurses out of a total of 450, with support from private enterprises, local authorities, donations from local communities, support from PNSs and other sources. The total amount which was raised through such initiatives amount to USD 150,000.

In addition, a Task Force has been created by the BRC and the Federation to ensure that there will be no repetition of such a crisis. This Task Force is currently developing a sustainable concept to secure the nurses and their medico-social centres in 2003. Sustainability is also a key part of the overall change process which is ongoing at the moment in the BRC. Considerable progress is already made in transforming the organisation towards good governance and management, efficient programmes and fund-raising. This process needs more time and support, yet could also be under a considerable risk due to the present problems that may lead to a serious image and credibility difficulties of our National Society.

The International Federation encourages sister National Societies to support the BRC in providing contributions in order to successfully resolve this crisis.

For a full description of the National Society profile, see www.ifrc.org

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All International Federation Operations seek to adhere to the Code of Conduct and are committed to the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (SPHERE Project) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable.

For support to or for further information concerning Federation operations in this or other countries, please access the Federation website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

For longer-term programmes, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal.

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