

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

BOLIVIA: INTERNAL UNREST

8 June 2005

The Federation's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity. It is the world's largest humanitarian organization and its millions of volunteers are active in over 181 countries.

In Brief

This Bulletin (no. 01/2005) is being issued for information only, and reflects the status of the situation and information available at this time. The Federation is not seeking funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at this time.

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For longer-term programmes in this or other countries or regions, please refer to the Federation's Annual Appeal. For support to or for further information concerning Federation programmes or operations in this or other countries, or for national society profiles, please also access the Federation's website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

The Situation

The dramatic social unrest in Bolivia which has worsened in the past weeks could potentially degenerate further declared President Carlos Mesa a day after he offered to resign from office during a television speech in which, together with the mayor of El Alto, he called for a humanitarian truce to provide the capital city, La Paz and its satellite, El Alto with food and other basic supplies.

La Paz and El Alto are the places in the country where most of the demonstrations are taking place and are also the most affected. Protestors are calling for economic reforms and, in particular, increased rights for indigenous peoples who make up the majority of the country's population, together with nationalization of the gas and mining industry and the urgent convening of a constitutional assembly, clashing with those who are demanding greater autonomy for the western and eastern regions of the country. The road network in the country has now been blocked for three weeks with transportation reduced to 5 per cent of normal volume given a lack of fuel, limited water supply in several areas and food becoming more expensive and scarce day by day.

Red Cross action

This context has resulted in the National Board of the **Bolivian Red Cross**¹ (BRC) issuing a yellow alert which has now been in force for two weeks. This status relates to constant preparedness and the activation of contingency plans, as well as the implementation of appropriate emergency activities. Since the onset of the crisis, both the Federation and the ICRC have been in constant contact with the National Society. The head of the Regional Delegation of the ICRC and the Lima Regional Delegation's Programme Coordinator have been working together in La Paz to support the National Society, attending meetings with agencies in Bolivia and assessing the situation; the head of the ICRC's Regional Delegation has stayed in Bolivia to continue supporting the BRC, and to create space to carry out humanitarian work.

Some of the initial actions taken by the BRC have been to ensure dialogue with the protesting groups and governmental organizations in order for them to facilitate the normal transit of Red Cross ambulances to allow them to provide first aid relief to all those affected by the confrontations. The National Society stated that all its personnel and methods of transportation would be clearly identified with the Red Cross emblem and that their function would be to provide neutral, impartial and independent aid. A group of some ten volunteers are working in shifts of four hours supported by three ambulances. All of them have been correctly identified to avoid confusion when assisting in case of suffocation caused by the constant use of tear gas and projectiles or in case of injury during the confrontations. The National Society has initiated a radio campaign, urging protestors to allow doctors, ambulances and Red Cross volunteers to provide medical and first aid assistance.

The BRC has contacted the Ministry of Health (MoH) to facilitate coordination and is holding daily consultations with the MoH, the World Food Programme, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), OXFAM, the city authorities and other organizations. A Red Cross health post has been transferred and has been re-located near to the main square in La Paz, close to the area where the clashes are taking place, in order to provide a more efficient service to those in need of medical attention and first aid.

The Red Cross was contacted by the Ministry of Health in order to move a major batch of donated vaccines worth USD 2 million that were being held by Customs at the El Alto airport and were in risk of irreversible damage given that it was impossible to transport them to the safety of cold storage. Volunteers in two Red Cross vehicles, with the support of an ICRC delegate, transported the vaccine which now is being correctly stored for later distribution. The BRC was again called upon on 8 April in order to transport vaccines for delivery to the rest of the country and to supply ice in order to keep another batch of vaccine refrigerated in the airport, pending an authorization to be taken to its destination.

Various interviews on the radio have been given by the president of the National Society and the representatives of the ICRC and the Federation in order to call to the attention of the public the need for respect of the emblem as a symbol of neutrality. The BRC has also taken part in a series of meetings with representatives of the UN system in order to jointly monitor the situation.

Last Thursday, the Ministry of Health, the Red Cross and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) held a meeting in order to evaluate the health area and work on an emergency plan. Another meeting among the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF and CARITAS will take place in La Paz this week to review immediate necessities.

On 8 June, responding to the worrying humanitarian situation of the people of the two cities of La Paz and El Alto, the BRC, with support from the ICRC, has started negotiations with the leaders of the social movements which are blocking the two cities in order to obtain a temporary suspension so that provisions of food for vulnerable people in hospitals, old people's homes, orphanages and prisons, oxygen for the hospitals and gas for cooking purposes can reach the two cities. Whilst the final decision is still pending, there is a high probability that the BRC will be in charge of this humanitarian corridor.

¹ Bolivian Red Cross www.cruzrojaboliviana.org

The German Red Cross (GRC) has contacted the ICRC and shared the list of the equipment the GRC has available in its warehouse in Lima ready to be sent to the Bolivian Red Cross, if required, in order to support the BRC's humanitarian activities in this crisis.

Plan of Action

Should the situation deteriorate further, the National Society will, together with the ICRC and the Federation, develop an appropriate plan of action in order to respond to the most urgent humanitarian needs of the vulnerable populations of El Alto, La Paz and other towns of the country.

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