

# 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

## COLOMBIA: FLOODS

15 February 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 Information Bulletin (no. 01/2005) is being issued for information only. The Federation is not seeking funding or other assistance from donors for this operation at this time.**

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### The Situation

Heavy rains are occurring in Colombia due to currents and cold fronts that have been forming over the Atlantic Ocean. The rains began approximately two weeks ago, just 45 days after the end of the previous rainy season. These heavy rains have come just as the Colombian Red Cross Society (CRCS) is completing its distributions of relief goods to families affected by severe flooding last October (please see appeal 24/04). This most recent rainy season is already proving more devastating than the previous; in just 15 days, the rains have affected 5,536 families (27,088 people), injuring 99 people and killing 28. Injured persons are being cared for by the Colombian public health system. Reports also indicate that 1,180 houses have been severely damaged, while another 392 homes have been completely destroyed. Of the 35 affected municipalities in the country, 15 were also affected by the previous rainy season. The most affected areas are in the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander, where the heavy rains have caused river waters to swell, sweeping away mud and vegetation. The rains are highly unusual during this time of year, which is usually characterized by extreme dryness and forest fires. According to authorities from the National Disaster Response and Preparedness System (SNPAD), the rains are expected to continue for several days.

According to the government's Institute of Water, Meteorology and Environmental Studies (IDEAM), the rains are expected to continue, causing water levels to rise in the following municipalities: Ataco, Rióblanco and Chaparral (department of Tolima), San Vincent de Chucurí, Lebrija and Girón (department of Santander), Cúcuta, Puerto Santander and Sardinata (department of Norte de Santander). IDEAM has recommended that rivers in these

areas be closely monitored. There is also a high probability of landslides and increased water levels in the “Piedemonte Llanero” and coffee growing regions and in some areas of the departments of Antioquia, Tolima, Huila, Santander, Norte de Santander and Nariño.

In departments such as Santander, authorities activated local disaster committees and are now carrying out relief activities. The national government was examining the possibility of declaring a state of emergency in Santander and declaring an emergency situation in the municipality of Puerto Santander, in the department of Norte de Santander. Puerto de Santander was particularly badly hit by the floods of 2004 and is once again one of the most seriously affected areas in the country. Roads in these two departments have been damaged by landslides and flooding, which is making relief efforts more difficult.

A yellow alert was declared in the department of Tolima, which could be upgraded to an orange alert if the needs continue to increase. Meanwhile, search and rescue activities are ongoing in the department of Meta, areas of which have been isolated by the overflowing Guatiquia and Guayuriba rivers. An orange alert has been declared in the department of Huila and the floodgates of the Betanía reservoir are being monitored closely as they are nearly at full capacity. Preventative measures are being taken in anticipation of increased water levels of the Magdalena River, which flows out of this reservoir. In the Colombian capital of Bogotá, officials are monitoring the Tunjuelito and Quebradas Limas rivers, which overflowed during the last rainy season, causing serious damage in the city.

The Colombian government, through the Ministry of the Interior’s Department for Disaster Prevention and Response, has made available 350 million pesos (USD 150,279) from the National Disaster Fund, of which 290 million will be used for food and non-food relief items and 60 million will be used to provide logistics support to the regional and local committees and relief organizations in the department of Santander. The government is also coordinating with the regional committees in Tolima, Cundinamarca, Norte de Santander and Meta to evaluate the mobilization of resources to respond to this disaster. On Tuesday, 15 February, three ministers, along with representatives of the Department of Disaster Prevention and Response, the director general of the Colombian Civil Defence and the national relief director of the Colombian Red Cross Society went to the affected area to evaluate the needs and coordinate relief activities in the most affected areas. The Civil Defence and the National Fire Brigade are also supporting search and rescue, first aid, evacuation and shelter activities.

## **Red Cross and Red Crescent action**

The relief operation is being supported by the CRCS and the National Disaster Fund, and is being coordinated by the regional committee for disaster prevention and response. The national headquarters of the Colombian Red Cross Society (CRCS) has instructed branches in the affected areas to activate their contingency plans. In the department of Santander, the CRCS has been active since the beginning of the emergency, coordinating with the local disaster prevention and response system to carry out search and rescue activities and damage and needs assessments, as well as to move affected families to temporary shelters and transport 4.5 tonnes of non-food relief items from Bogotá. These relief goods will complement the aid being provided by the local and national governments. On 15 February, a commission made up of 12 Red Cross volunteers, a transport unit and a river boat, left from Barrancabermeja to evaluate the conditions in communities located along the Colorado and Magdalena rivers, where increased water levels have been reported.

In the department of Tolima, the CRCS is supporting a damage and needs assessment in order to identify the needs of the affected families. Together with the government, the CRCS will send relief items that have been made available by the local disaster response system. In the department of Norte de Santander, rescue and evacuation activities were carried out in one of the five affected neighbourhoods in the departmental capital. Damage and needs assessments are being carried out in three other neighbourhoods. In the municipality of Puerto Santander, the Red Cross has provided boats and volunteers to carry out surveys and damage assessments, set up a temporary shelter, and distribute water and blankets. Non-perishable food and non-food items are also being sent by the Red Cross to temporary shelters in Puerto Santander and Parada.

In the department of Meta, a CRCS rescue unit and an ambulance with 15 volunteers have been supporting search and rescue activities in communities that have been cut off by the flooding of the Guayuriba River. Another unit coordinated the damage and needs assessment in the vulnerable communities located along the Guatiquia River. In

the department of Cundinamarca, the local branch of the CRCS has made available a rapid response team in case it is necessary to evacuate families from the district capital and other affected municipalities.

The CRCS continues to mobilize its human resources and logistics equipment in coordination with the National Disaster Prevention and Response System. In total, some 450 volunteers have been activated in the affected departments, as well as more than 14 vehicles, including ambulances, rescue boats, and telecommunications equipment. In addition, in the coming days the CRCS and the Civil Defence will carry out a specific evaluation of the housing conditions of the affected families in Santander, which will help to support the relief and rehabilitation activities that will be carried out by the national and local governments.

*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.*

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