

MONGOLIA: STEPPE AND FOREST FIRES

25 April 1996

information bulletin no.1

The disaster

Steppe and forest fires are raging out of control in northern Mongolia. Such fires are common, especially during the spring time, but this year's blaze is much larger than usual. The first fire started in the northeastern aimag (Province) of Dornod on 23 February. Others swiftly followed in other areas, eventually covering 43 somons (County) of ten aimags -- Dornod, Hentii, Sukhbaatar, Selenge, Bulgan, Tov, Huvsgul, Arhangai, Uvs and Zavkhan. Of the 130 fires that have occurred so far, 37 are still burning in nine aimags.

Of the ten affected aimags, five -- Dornod, Hentii, Selenge, Huvsgul and Uvs -- are particularly badly hit. The total number of reported deaths are now 3 persons (all in Dornod); 16 persons suffered various degrees of burns. Twenty cattle shelters, 300 cattle, 70 tons of hay, and 10 water wells were destroyed. Fifty-six families, or more than 300 persons, have had their ger housing (traditional tent housing for nomads) burned down. Four thousand people and 200 vehicles have been mobilised for fire fighting from the Civil Defence and other sources.

Latest events

A State Emergency Commission, in a meeting yesterday, 24 April, set up a working group to assess the situation, made up of representatives of the Civil Defence, Ministry of Nature and Environment, National Development Board, Poverty Alleviation Programme, Ministry of External Relations, Market Research Institute and the Mongolia Red Cross Society.

In a press conference afterwards, the Commission said the situation was worsening. The fires are out of control and there are not enough resources to help victims. The economic damage is huge.

The Government is to meet tomorrow, 26 April to decide what assistance is required; it is expected it will make an official appeal for external aid.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

A Steppe Fire Project, part of the MRCS Disaster Preparedness (DP) Programme supported by the International Federation, covers three northeastern aimags of Dornod, Hentii and Sukhbaatar.

Under another DPP project, (Zavkhan Project) in Zavkjan, Gobi Altai, Hovd, Huvsgul, Bayan-ulgii and Uvs, the staff have been trained to a certain extent in disaster relief operations. Supplies have been stocked in the three MRCS warehouses - MRCS HQs, Dornod and Zavkhan - but are not sufficient. There is an urgent need to purchase basic relief goods.

On 17 April, a member of the Executive Committee of Dornod aimag Red Cross flew with the State Emergency Commission to Dashbalbar somon, one of the hardest hit, in order to assess the situation and to provide warm clothes, blankets, quilts, candles, flour and rice to seven families, or 43 people. The somon Red Cross delegate and volunteers trained under the Steppe Fire Project have been taking part in the fire fighting efforts.

On 25 April, the programme manager of the MRCS HQs flew to Khalkhgol somon of Dornod with the Minister of Health to assist the Dornod Red Cross branch, which is purchasing relief goods for 28 families.

The Federation has a resident Representative in Mongolia, who is actively assisting the MRCS.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

There is no information available of relief efforts by NGOs or other agencies. It is expected that organisations will act once the official announcement by the Government of Mongolia has been made tomorrow. The Japanese Embassy and UNDP are ready to provide assistance after the Government announcement.

The next step

While awaiting the Government announcement, the MRCS has decided to provide emergency assistance to 56 families, or 300 persons, in the ten aimags, on the basis of information made available from the working group of the State Emergency Commission and the press conference. Detailed information on the number of families and their location, etc. is being collected.

While relief goods which are in stock under the 1995 DPP implementation will be utilised, more relief goods will be purchased locally, either in Ulaanbaatar or in each aimag. All items will be procured within the country. The total amount of assistance required is CHF 38,550, which will be written into the framework of the 1996 DPP plan.

The US Embassy has just announced it will release MNT15,000,000 (CHF 37,310) from its Disaster Relief Fund to the MRCS, to provide relief goods, including ger housing, for 56 families.

Conclusion

Further Information Bulletins will be issued as news about the government announcement and assessments of needs becomes available.

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