

# ***BELARUS, MOLDOVA, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE : WINTER ASSISTANCE***

*9 September 1998*

## ***The Disaster***

The International Federation, in collaboration with the national Red Cross Societies of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, is preparing the launch of a major appeal for humanitarian assistance to meet the most essential needs of hundreds of thousands of people suffering from the effects of the current social and financial crisis in Russia. Throughout the four countries, 73 million people are already living below the poverty line and many millions are expected to face the harshest winter in decades.

The widespread media coverage of Russia's economic and political turmoil has ensured global awareness of the crisis itself as well as of the probable effects on the rest of the world, but with events still unfolding, little has been said about just how devastating the repercussions will be for an already beleaguered Russian population of close on 150 million, out of whom 31 million are estimated to be living below the poverty line. The knock-on effect across Russia's borders-- to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova -- is likely to be enormous.

The socio-economic dislocation resulting from the drastic reforms carried out since 1991 has enveloped not only the most vulnerable groups (elderly, disabled, single parent families, families with many children and rural dwellers) but also social groups not normally associated with under-privilege: public employees such as teachers, miners, doctors and workers in institutes, as well as those living in far-off regions that were subsidised under the Soviet system. In addition, there has been a marked deterioration in the state's capacity to provide social security, health care and crime prevention over the past decade, resulting in declining health among the population and fuelling increased alcoholism and drug abuse.

Last winter (1997/98) the International Federation issued an appeal for CHF 22,742,000 to provide basic food and clothing to more than one million of the most vulnerable people in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. The appeal highlighted the growing poverty and misery prevailing in the region since the fall of communism - a situation aggravated during the severe winter months.

Conditions this winter are expected to be far worse as a result of the economic crisis which will push up the cost of food, create shortages (through reduced food imports) and increase fuel prices. The situation is further compounded by the persistent non-payment of wages, pensions and other benefits.

Warnings of poor grain and potato harvests in Russia this year are already causing serious concern. Only 28,6 million mt of grain had been harvested by the end of August, compared with 55,2 million mt by August 1997 (i.e. 48,2% of last year's harvest). A summer drought, followed by August rains has ruined the potato crop according to the Agriculture Ministry, which says Russians eat six times as many potatoes per year as Americans (accounting for 10% of the nation's calorie intake). There has been a striking increase in reliance on 'dacha produce' grown on individual plots. Before the collapse of communism, 60% of Russia's potatoes were grown on private plots; this figure is now 90%.

Viktor Klestun, Director of Russia's Agrarian Institute, has predicted 'severe food shortages' particularly of vegetable oil and meat products. (In 1997, Russia imported 650,000 tons of beef - of which nearly 340,000 tons came from the European Union; meat factories inside Russia are operating at 37% capacity).

Few would dare to make any predictions about developments in Russia and her neighbours, but one fact is clear: as the crisis in Russia has deepened, the flow of international aid has dwindled. Millions of Russians as well as neighbouring peoples in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova are now facing a rapid downward slide into poverty and misery. The 'coping mechanisms' of former times, such as the barter economy and dacha produce, must be supplemented by emergency assistance on a large scale if a human catastrophe is to be averted.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent Action***

The International Federation, with the National Societies of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, is currently assessing the situation, and identifying the most vulnerable beneficiaries and regions, preparatory to launching an Appeal for humanitarian assistance covering a six month period over the coming winter.

The International Federation strongly encourages participating National Societies to consider and prepare for national launches of the appeal, and special fund-raising campaigns such as street collections and mailing campaigns. The International Federation will also present external donors with concrete proposals and applications for funding.

Peter Rees-Gildea  
Director  
Operations Funding and  
Reporting Department

Renny Nancholas  
Director  
Europe Department