

COLOMBIA: EARTHQUAKE

26 January 1999

The Disaster

A powerful earthquake struck western Colombia yesterday at 13 19 hours local time (18.19 GMT). The quake, 6 on the Richter scale, was followed by several strong tremors. The area is a mountainous, prosperous coffee growing region with a total population of three million.

According to initial figures from the Colombian Red Cross, at least 400 people died in the disaster and another 2,315 were injured. The worst hit towns are Armenia (1,000 injured), Pereira (480 injured) and Calarca (334 injured). Some 800 houses have been destroyed, leaving about 4,000 people homeless, but damage assessments are still going on.

Roads from the capital, Bogota, westwards to the disaster area are cut, but the main road from Cali, south-west of the area, remains open. The control towers of the two airports in the region have been damaged and traffic is being limited to emergency evacuation flights.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Colombian Red Cross (CRC) is very strongly represented in the disaster area. Local Red Cross units went into action immediately, aided by volunteers and trained emergency teams who moved in from neighbouring Departments. They include seven medical teams, and four of the Colombian Red Cross's seven specialised search and rescue teams which use sniffer dogs. (Each team is made up of four handlers and four dogs). Six emergency vehicles and four ambulances were also sent to the area.

At present more than 500 volunteers and staff are working side by side with local authorities and the army on rescuing people from the rubble, giving first aid and evacuating the injured. They are utilising earth moving machinery and heavy duty cutting tools.

Three of the National Society's nine emergency warehouses are sited in the area and have sufficient stocks for the first few days of the emergency situation, but these supplies could run out rapidly, depending on the extent of needs.

There are three university hospitals and one paediatric hospital in the area and they are taking in casualties, the National Society reports. Blood collections have been organised in Cali and Bogota and supplies are being delivered to the area.

Needs

The CRC expects to complete its needs assessment by late tomorrow (Wednesday) but has already alerted the Federation Secretariat that it will be asking for international support. It anticipates that tents, food, blankets and 4WD transport will be needed, but stresses that all these goods can be purchased locally. It estimates the cost of this first round of emergency supplies at USD 250,000.

The Federation today released CHF 300,000 from its Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to enable the CRC to begin purchases of relief supplies, and assigned a media delegate to work with the National Society. The ICRC donated USD 100,000 to the CRC and offered logistical support. National Societies will be kept informed of developments. A preliminary appeal, or an appeal, will be issued as soon as sufficient information becomes available.

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