

IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

LEAGUE OF RED CROSS SOCIETIES

TO THE HELP OF EAST PAKISTAN CYCLONE VICTIMS

The League of Red Cross Societies in Geneva launched an urgent appeal to all its member Societies on 14 November, for massive aid for the victims of the cyclone and tidal wave which devastated the Bengal region, the East Pakistan coastal area and its off-shore islands on the previous day.

Winds which blew at over 140 miles (200 kms) an hour and waves 60 feet (20 metres) high wrecked hundreds of thousands of dwellings. The number of victims is incalculable and cattle and harvests have been wiped out.

The Chairman of the Pakistan Red Cross, Justice B. A. Siddiky, asked for immediate despatch of blankets, warm garments, powdered or concentrated milk, multi-vitamins and cash for local purchases. The League immediately sent a liaison officer, Mr. Jurg Vittani to Pakistan, to ensure co-ordination with the National Society whose relief teams were at work in the disaster area.

In the 24 hours following the appeal, donations announced by National Societies had topped the Sw. Frs. one million mark. By 20 November they exceeded 11 million.

Offers of help were in cash and kind, and the goods covered a wider than usual range: blankets, clothing, many items of food, all sorts of medicines, tents, water purification units, boats, oil, candles, bales of cloth.

Delegate Vittani cabled on 20 November that the water situation was still critical and that "only helicopters or flat-bottom boats" were suitable for distribution of relief supplies. The British Red Cross responded with 20 inflatable flat-bottom boats, with outboard-motors and personnel, each boat with a pay-load of one ton.

During the latter days of November, there were 13 Red Cross teams working with the Pakistan Army, which was assigned by the Pakistan Government to undertake the overall direction and co-ordination of the relief operation.

“ Kindly convey our gratitude and thanks to all members League which contributed so generously to our relief operation stop ” said Pakistan Red Cross Chairman Mr. Justice Siddiky on 24 November. Red Cross relief work was then in action.

Seventeen helicopters were in action, eight British, three French and six United States. Helicopters were in many places the only way to get food and medicine distributed rapidly, because of the extensive flooding of the devastated land. Flat-bottom boats were also needed: British Royal Navy vessels with 600 men and flat-bottom boats, are scheduled to set to work establishing a main supply dump at Patuakhali, from where they would cover Patuakhali District and South Bhola Island, one of the worst-hit areas.

League Vice-Chairman and Finnish Red Cross Secretary-General Kai Warras and Swedish Red Cross Dr. Lars Troell left Geneva for Dacca on 23 November, to strengthen the League team on the spot. They contacted the Pakistan Red Cross and other organisations, to examine some of the most urgent problems and to seek ways of speeding relief work.

It will be a long uphill fight to get life going again. The League has received the following message “ Pakcross continuing sustained action until at least end of year and we are counting on continued support from League members. Apprehending coming winter which will be extremely hard for survivors ”.

Simultaneously an agreement to co-operate with the United Nations in East Pakistan relief was worked out at UN Headquarters in New York by League Secretary-General Mr. Henrik Beer. The arrangement will be especially valuable in co-ordinating the relief efforts of the UN agencies which work to distribute relief and medicine.

At the end of November, a fortnight after it was launched, the League's appeal is still bringing in responses. Forty National Societies had by that date made donations in cash and in kind to a value of 16,443,811 Swiss francs. The League then issued, on 26 November, the following news release:

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The Red Cross relief action in devastated East Pakistan is now rolling smoothly into its second phase, with helicopters and boats distributing supplies regularly.

According to the delegate in Dacca "Pakistan Red Cross action now proceeding satisfactorily, with teams on Bhola Island and air-drops from Chittagong, but needs for blankets and clothing are still unlimited, and cash still needed for local or regional purchases".

Mr. Kai Warras has made a preliminary survey of the situation. The first urgent life-saving phase lasted four days, and the rescue and relief workers have now moved straight on to the next phase, which is in full swing.

The whole disaster area will be reached and carefully checked, to obtain a thorough knowledge of the full needs of surviving victims this forthcoming winter. A subsequent and third phase of the relief operation will then go on until the next harvest, in April.

Delegate Vittani underlines that this medium-term relief programme is essential now that the short-term emergency relief has been brought in. The bulkier needs of the survivors must still be met, but these can be brought in, he explains, by sea. All their simplest needs of daily life, even such things as cooking utensils and hurricane lamps, must be replaced after the cyclone and tidal wave which swept down on to them just two weeks ago.

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The ICRC has been in constant touch with the League from the time the catastrophe in East Pakistan became known. It contributed to the League's assistance programme on 22 November with a radio transmitting/receiving station which is now in Dacca to overcome difficulties of communication between Dacca and Geneva and maintain a permanent link.

In addition, the European Economic Community has drawn from its stocks for Nigeria 1,200 tons of food which the ICRC has made available to the League for its relief operations. The EEC has asked the ICRC to provide air transport of these goods to Dacca and has undertaken to pay the 850,000 dollar freight.