

Four deadly disasters strike Asia Pacific

Source: International Federation of Red Cross And Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

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As earthquakes are being reported in Indonesia the Red Cross Red Crescent is now responding to four near-simultaneous disasters in Asia Pacific.

The Asia Pacific region is tragically living up to its reputation as one of the most disaster-prone regions of the world with four near-simultaneous disasters – devastation from Typhoon Ketsana and torrential rains in the Philippines and Viet Nam in South East Asia, and a strong earthquake followed by a tsunami on the Samoan islands, in the Pacific. In addition, at the time of writing, a 7.9 earthquake was recorded on Wednesday 30 September, off the West coast of Indonesia, about 50 kilometres from Padang, the capital of West Sumatra. Buildings were damaged but there are no reports of deaths or injuries, so far. A tsunami watch was immediately issued for Indonesia, India, Thailand and Malaysia.

These disasters have taken the lives of hundreds of people across the region, sowed devastation, chaos and economic hardship, and are severely testing the mettle and disaster preparedness of both governments and humanitarian actors. For their part, Red Cross Societies in the region immediately mobilized thousands of volunteers and staff skilled in disaster management. Thanks to early warning systems, threatened populations were evacuated ahead of the Typhoon and the tsunami; shelters were set up, pre-positioned relief stocks distributed as well as water and food.

Early Warning saves lives

"It is in these circumstances that investment in disaster preparedness and early warning pays off in real terms and lives are literally saved because of effective readiness", says Michael Annear, disaster management coordinator for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Asia Pacific. "The disaster preparedness training which was done in all three countries by the Red Cross has proven its worth, with thousands of lives saved in rapid evacuation, the establishment of shelters and distribution of food, water and essential relief items. Now we will focus our efforts on the restoration of shelter and livelihoods."

"We regret any loss of life and the fact remains there are still too many deaths and injuries. Long term assistance will be needed to ensure recovery and we hope investment in risk reduction measures will continue to grow."

Emergency funding already released

On the global level, the IFRC has released contingency funds to support national Red Cross operations in all three countries (250,000 Swiss francs for the Philippines, 314,000 Swiss francs for Viet Nam and 325,000 Swiss francs for Samoa). An emergency appeal is being finalized for the Philippines and other appeals may be issued as assessments arrive and relief and recovery needs are better understood.

Some 135 Samoa Red Cross volunteers are currently distributing clean water, first aid supplies, tarpaulins and other relief to affected families. These specially-trained volunteers initially provided early warnings to people in coastal settlements to stay clear of beaches, they supported evacuation efforts in and around Apia, and are managing three camps for the displaced. They are also participating in needs assessments. According to officials, at least 79 people have died and it is estimated that 60 villages and 15,000 people have been affected by this disaster. Tremors continue to shake the country, and tsunami alarms are still sounding.

In Tonga, reports indicate that the Niua Islands and several villages were flooded, preliminary figures put the death toll at seven, with three people missing. The Tonga Red Cross has mobilized its volunteers to provide emergency assistance and conduct further assessments.

In Viet Nam, the death toll stands at 38 to date, with 10 people reported missing and at least 81 injured. An estimated three million people have been affected. Flooding has been the worst in 45 years in some provinces (Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Kon Tum) and extensive damage is reported to rice paddies, sugar cane, vegetables and aquaculture. Access to flooded communes and mountainous districts is very difficult. Red Cross staff and volunteers continue to manage shelters and provide emergency relief to affected families.

Volunteers are vital first responders

"The fact that Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are based in the communities, close to the people, makes it possible to mobilize emergency help immediately, and to respond to three large emergencies at the same time," explains Alistair Henley, Director of the IFRC's office for Asia Pacific in Kuala Lumpur. "Dedicated, trained, and prepared volunteers, supported by strong National Societies are the key to our ability to be where we are needed, when we are needed. Community-based volunteers also play a key role in preparedness activities at the grassroots level, before disaster strikes."

In the Philippines, still reeling from the devastation brought by Typhoon Ketsana, the current death toll stands at 246 people, according to official figures, with 38 missing and five injured. Some two million people are estimated to have been affected, with nearly 570,000 displaced.

Thousands of Philippine National Red Cross (PNRC) volunteers have been working round the clock since 26 September in search and rescue operations, delivering food and other relief items to survivors, psychosocial support to traumatized families and first aid to the sick and injured.

Note to editors:

Please keep updated on our website, including our Google Earth maps, at:
<http://www.ifrc.org/what/disasters/response/asia-floods/index.asp>

Follow our twitter stream from the disaster zone here: www.twitter.com/federation

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