

IASC Weekly Meeting
16 February 2005
Notes



1: Update on recent snowfalls and rain in Tajikistan and Pakistan
(by Dusan Zupka, OCHA)

Mr. Dusan Zupka, Humanitarian Affairs Officer in OCHA's Europe, Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa Section gave a briefing on the situation in Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan after heavy snowfall and rains have affected the countries over the past 2 weeks.

The weather conditions have caused avalanches and severe flooding creating a critical humanitarian situation in all three countries.

The context and the rescue capacities in the three countries vary greatly, but a common problem is the lack of access to the many mountainous communities. The harsh weather has blocked and damaged roads and even access by helicopter has been impossible in many cases. The lack of access has made assessments difficult.

In Pakistan the affected population is around 500.000 with 500 confirmed dead and approximately 2000 missing.

The Government of Pakistan has not officially requested international assistance, but expressed through talks with the Resident Coordinator (RC) that any support, including from UN-agencies, would be welcomed.

OCHA has released 50.000 USD from its emergency funds to assist the relief work in Pakistan, primarily to provide blankets and tents. The food situation is under control, but once the more remote areas are accessed the requirements and needs could rise. Other UN-agencies, such as UNHCR, WHO and UNESCO have also announced releasing of funds.

Currently there is no need for an international/UN search and rescue operation. The national authorities have already deployed over 4000 soldiers and civil defence personnel to conduct this work. Also the area is a political tense one, with some rebel groups residing.

Tajikistan has officially requested international assistance, including the UN. Heavy snow and subsequent avalanches has caused 25-35 deaths but affected tenths of thousands of people.

The Tajikistan authorities have a weaker emergency capacity than Pakistan, and the UN Country Team and RC is directly assisting the Ministry of Emergency. OCHA has released 30.000 USD from its emergency grant to be used primarily for fuel and logistical purposes.

Afghanistan has also requested international assistance. UN-agencies, already strongly presented in the country, have responded to this appeal. No recommendations have been made to release extra UN resources, than the once already allocated for Afghanistan. 800.000 USD from a UN draught fund for Afghanistan, have been released for the immediate relief effort. Good inter-agency cooperation is in place, and the situation is reported as being under control.

In the discussion following the briefing, agencies confirmed the difficulty in accessing the affected areas. UNICEF noted that many schools have been affected.

IFRC reported that the Federation has released 50.000 CHF from its Disaster Relief Fund to the Pakistan Red Crescent.

For Tajikistan the point was made that, since there is presently no CAP for the country, some kind of common appeal might have to be considered when needs assessments have been completed.

2: Update on the current situation in Togo (by Marcel Mikala, OCHA)

Mr. Marcel Mikala, Humanitarian Affairs Officer in OCHA's Africa II Section, provided an update on the current situation in Togo.

On 5 February, Togo's President Mr. Gnassingbe Eyadema passed away, which led to a political crisis in the country. Some hours after the death of the President, the army chiefs suspended the constitution and handed the power to the President's son, Mr. Faure Gnassingbe who held the position of Minister of Public Works, Mines and Telecommunications before.

According to the constitution, the post should have gone to the President of the National Assembly, Mr. Fambare Ouattara Natchaba. However, the military promptly closed Togo's borders to prevent his return from abroad. On 6 February, the Togolese Parliament, dominated by presidential loyalists, voted to change the constitution in order to legalize ex-post Mr. Gnassingbe's assumption of power. The changed constitution was adopted with virtually no discussion, allowing Mr. Gnassingbe to serve the remainder of his father's elected term, which expires in 2006.

The international community expressed great concern over these events. Diplomats from the UN, the EU, France, the US and Nigeria all boycotted the ceremony on 7 February, when Mr. Gnassingbe was formally sworn in.

Worried that Togo might become another destabilising force in an already-turbulent sub-region, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which Togo is a member, organised an ad-hoc summit on 9 February in Niger to discuss the situation.

Since the assumption of power by the former president's son, main opposition political parties are calling for general strikes and are organising public rallies to protest against the "coup d'Etat" in Togo.

Because of the various tensions which are already destabilising the West African sub-region, it is important for the humanitarian community to carefully follow the evolution of Togo's internal situation and to develop an Early Warning Strategy.

Following the briefing, concern was expressed over the severity of this crisis, also in light of Togo's economic and social situation and the continuing tensions over the last years.

It was mentioned that two Contingency Planning exercises have been made for West Africa during the past six months, including Togo. It would therefore be important to examine and consider the developments that have taken place since the last exercise. In this regard, also the upcoming meeting of the IASC Sub-Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency Planning was highlighted, which will surely look at Togo's situation and which could provide support to further Preparedness and Contingency Planning efforts.

Update on the situation from the field since the briefing given on Wednesday, 16 February:

1) In the political front, the new installed President, Mr. Faure Gnassingbé, flew to Nigeria on Thursday 17 February, for talks with President Olusegun Obasanjo, who is leading regional efforts to reverse the Togolese leader's Army-backed succession to power.

In the same context, it was reported that the situation seems to be calm in Lomé, even if main opposition political parties expect to organise a public rally on Saturday 19 February.

2) In the humanitarian area it was confirmed that an OCHA staff from OCHA's regional office in Dakar, Mr. François Landiech, will undertake a mission in the country from 17 to 24 February to help the UN Country Team and some other partners, like NGOs, in the formulation of a contingency plan and other preventive measures.

3) OCHA Geneva will keep in touch for further developments.

3: AOB

(by Jamie McGoldrick, OCHA)

- Briefing on latest developments in Lebanon

Mr. Jamie McGoldrick, Chief of OCHA's Europe, Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa Section, gave a briefing on the latest developments in Lebanon, following the death of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Mr. Rafik Hariri.

Although there are no humanitarian implications so far, Mr. Hariri's assassination could have extensive national and regional political consequences.

Since the attack, there has been enforced call for the retreat of the 15000 Syrian troops still present in Lebanon.

On Tuesday, 15 February, the UN Security Council issued a statement calling for the clarification of the attack and for the perpetrators to be brought to justice, and also urging compliance with Security Council Resolution 1559, adopted on 2 September 2004, calling for a withdrawal of Syrian troops and respect for Lebanon's national sovereignty.

As parliamentary elections are upcoming in Lebanon in May, the internal discussions between the pro-Syrian government and the anti-Syrian opposition had intensified lately and turned into tensions after the death of Mr. Hariri. While the Lebanese leaders have condemned the attack very strongly, the Lebanese opposition accused not only Syria but also the Lebanese government being responsible for the crime. Although there have not been any claims of responsibility yet, President Bush clearly condemned Syria for the assassination and recalled the American ambassador to Damascus for consultation. Also the US Press has consistently blamed Syria. However, there does not seem to be any concrete evidence of any Syrian involvement in the crime.

Mr. Hariri resigned as Prime Minister in October 2004 after parliament had amended the Lebanese constitution to extend pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud's term for three years. However, Mr. Hariri could have become a candidate for the upcoming elections.

The longer-term consequence for Syria could be further pressures and sanctions from the US, which would most likely have a negative effect on Lebanon as well.

In this regard, also Syria's believed support to terrorist organisation like the Hezbollah and the Hamas is an important factor in the Syrian-US relation. Overall, this event is likely to have destabilising regional implications, including the possibility of an intensified Intifadah.

4: IASC Standard Briefing
(by Kirsi Madi, IASC Secretariat)

- The IASC Task Force on Assistance to Tsunami Affected Communities will meet on Wednesday 16 February from 17h00 – 18h00 in Room III of the Palais des Nations.
- The IASC Task Force on Gender will meet on Wednesday 16 February from 14h00 – 18h00 in Room M205 in the WHO (M building, 2nd floor). The agenda includes items on the IASC policy on gender-based violence, gender mainstreaming in emergencies and on Beijing +10.
- An ad-hoc Working Group Meeting on pledges, commitments and contributions to IASC members will take place on Monday, 21 February from 15h00 to 17h00 in Room F-3 of the Palais des Nations. A separate email has been sent to the IASC WG.
- On Monday and Tuesday next week, 21 and 22 February, the CAP SWG will hold the workshop “Strengthening the Analysis of Needs” on the Needs Assessment Framework and Matrix (NAFM). An invitation to the agencies has already been sent.
- The UNDAC Advisory Board is scheduled to be held on Tuesday and Wednesday next week, 22- 23 February in Geneva. The meeting will be chaired by Ms. Yvette Stevens, Director of OCHA Geneva. Agencies who are participants of the UNDAC system have already been invited.

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List of Participants**



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