



Central Asia

United Nations

Introduction

Central Asia is one of the most seismically active areas of the world, which, together with floods, land slides, extreme cold and drought regularly causes economic and environmental damage. Uneven development has increased vulnerability of communities to these hazards. The picture is further compounded by possible regional implications of socio-political instability.

Despite varying capacity, it is well understood that national governments will lead the response to a large scale disaster, aided by strong Red Crescent Societies. Coordination with the international community is well organized in some countries, for example Tajikistan, but needs improvement in others. In addition, the threat of a large-scale event affecting several Central Asian countries at once has led to renewed interest in regional cooperation on disaster management. This agenda requires further development.

Given the need to strengthen disaster preparedness in some countries and the renewed momentum for regional cooperation, OCHA has decided to establish a Regional Disaster Response Adviser (RDRA) in Central Asia. The office is based in Almaty, Kazakhstan and covers the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

CENTRAL ASIA



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

Produced by: OCHA ROMENACA

Date: April 2008

Current issues

The beginning of 2008 has seen an increase in natural disasters, mainly related to extreme winter conditions affecting the entire region.

The South of Kyrgyzstan was affected by an earthquake on 1 January 2008. Some 5,000 people in a mountainous area outside of Osh were left without shelter in temperatures of -20. The international community responded swiftly and generously to a request from the government for international assistance.

In Tajikistan, heavy snowfall and frozen rivers have damaged water and electrical supply systems, isolated mountain villages and damaged winter crops. As a result, the population remained with little protection against extreme temperatures, faced difficulty in accessing safe drinking water, experienced hunger and lost valuable livestock. Due to the lack of electricity and water, hospitals, schools, orphanages and other care facilities reduced the number of operating hours or closed down altogether, making it harder to respond to the increased morbidity as a result of cold and lack of hygiene. An appeal for USD 25 million in international assistance was launched on 18 February to support the work of 7 UN Agencies and 5 international NGOs in assisting some 2 million affected people. The appeal has been 27% funded.

While the onset of spring has brought long-awaited warmer temperatures, it also replaced snow with intense rains and avalanches. As a result of increased avalanches and mudflows a number of critical access roads have been closed, including the Dushanbe-Khujand road connecting the South and North of the country. Government and international organizations, working together as part of a system called REACT (Rapid Emergency Assessment and Coordination Team), are preparing possible spring related disaster scenarios in order to prepare themselves for the expected increase in avalanches, mudflows, floods and landslides.

Some 13,000 people in the South of Kazakhstan have been affected by floods as a result of rapid melting of snow. The Ministry of Emergencies responded decisively, meeting most of the humanitarian needs of the affected population. The international community showed its solidarity by donating some small relief items.

It is feared that throughout Central Asia spring flooding this year may be worse than normal as a result of the unusually

cold winter, causing frozen rivers and above normal precipitation of snow during the first two months of 2008, combined with a sudden rise in temperatures and heavy rains in March. Another concern is related to "ice-dams" that have formed in some of the major rivers when chunks of ice started floating down-stream bumping into constructions along the way and blocking the flow of water.

The role of OCHA

The opening of the OCHA office for Central Asia proved well-timed. By providing timely and accurate information, supporting coordination arrangements and ensuring that response strategies are agreed upon by all relevant actors, the office has been instrumental in mobilizing the international community's response to the multiple crises in the region since the onset of 2008.

The office is currently leading the discussions on preparedness for a regional flood scenario.

The office has further played an important role in facilitating the inter-governmental discussions between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to establish a regional centre for disaster risk management. This work is ongoing and it is hoped that by the end of 2008 the centre will be formally established. This initiative is extremely important in fostering stronger regional cooperation on issues of disaster risk management. While the member countries will be able to take care of the centre's operating expenses, it is hoped that donor nations will appreciate the strategic value of this initiative and support specific initiatives or projects that the centre hopes to undertake.

The strategic priorities for the OCHA Central Asia office for 2008 are:

- » **Improved coordination structures:** The concept of Humanitarian Partnership Teams will be introduced, supported by training in humanitarian policies, structures and management arrangements. In addition, the office will continue to support the consultations on a regional centre for disaster risk management, including the high-level ministerial meeting towards the end of the year to promote stronger action-oriented regional cooperation.
- » **Information management:** A web-interface will be developed and maintained on which a number of information management products will be hosted, such

as risk maps, baseline information, a contact database, who-does-what-where, maps, an events calendar, a document centre, etc.

- » **Risk reduction:** Humanitarian Partnership Teams will be assisted in developing and testing contingency plans. In addition, the OCHA office will advocate for the incorporation of risk reduction activities into longer-term developmental planning tools. Finally, the OCHA office will help integrate pandemic preparedness into overall disaster management planning.
- » **Needs assessments:** The OCHA office will ensure that baseline information on a number of indicators is collated within the needs assessment framework, against which the impact of disasters can be assessed. In addition, the OCHA office will help promote a coordinated and standardized approach towards needs and impact assessments.
- » **Trend analysis:** The OCHA office will produce quarterly early warning - early action reports to help provide an oversight of hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities and link this with actions that need to be taken to strengthen preparedness for the priority risks. A quarterly update will provide a good trend analysis.
- » **Protection:** In light of the recent political and social insecurities in the region as well as possible population movements as a result of natural disasters, the OCHA office will develop a protection strategy for the region, as part of the proposed contingency planning efforts.
- » **Advocacy:** The OCHA office will develop an advocacy strategy to help promote humanitarian principles in natural and man-made disasters.

Funding status

The OCHA office for Central Asia is currently under-funded. Its activities are being sustained by un-earmarked global funding. It is hoped that donor nations will appreciate the added value that the office has demonstrated since its inception six months ago and support the office in its core functions and strategic priorities.