

Red Cross and Red Crescent issue report

## Warnings of famine and starvation in the former Soviet Union

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The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has issued an urgent appeal for \$25 million in relief aid to Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. Over a million and a half people face famine and starvation as the winter months approach, according to these agencies. Particularly vulnerable are families with many children, orphans, pensioners, the handicapped and homeless.

According the Red Cross and Red Crescent 'Winter Emergency, 1998-1999' report: 'The financial crisis sweeping Russia and its neighbours has left millions of people struggling to survive in deteriorating economic and social circumstances.... The potentially fatal combination of economic crisis and the winter provide the blueprint for a growing, but so far *silent* disaster that places increasing numbers of people at risk.'

Borje Sjokvist, head of the Moscow delegation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, said, 'We fear that it might be the hardest winter in a generation. Old people are making comparisons to the tough winters of the 1940s, during the Second World War.'

The impending threat of famine also creates the conditions for masses of refugees. According to Sjokvist, 'Given the proximity of some vulnerable regions to neighboring countries, there might be a fear of a major population movement ... across borders or across the Baltic Sea.'

A number of natural disasters have also served to compound the economic crisis--floods in Eastern Siberia, droughts in the Urals and forest fires across large areas of Russia. This year's harvests are predicted to be poor. Russian potato crops have been damaged by heavy rains and that country's grain harvest is predicted to be down 25 percent from last year.

Seventy-three million people in these countries are living below the poverty line, according to agency estimates. Affected are not only the young, elderly and defenseless, but also social groups not previously associated with poverty: teachers, miners, doctors, and those living in far-flung areas previously subsidized under the Soviet system. Many of these people have not been paid in months as a result of the countries' economic crises.

Children face the greatest dangers of poverty and famine. Many cannot attend school for lack of proper clothing, and most schools can no longer provide free lunches. Relief agencies estimate that 50 percent of children are physically underdeveloped. Unofficial estimates indicate that there are at least 1 million street children roving across the Russian Federation, with proportionally similar figures in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova.

Statistics sighted in the relief appeal include the following:

- \* In **Belarus**, 4 million people, or 40 percent of the population, face absolute poverty, with monthly incomes below the 'survival minimum' of US\$30.

- \* Nearly 80 percent of the population of **Moldova** live below the poverty line.

- \* In **Russia**, despite the appearance of well-stocked store shelves, the majority of people cannot afford to buy food, as the barter system has virtually eliminated the use of money throughout the country's provinces. This is in a country where 70 percent of food must be imported.

- \* In **Ukraine**, growing debts to Russia for gas and oil have led to cuts in energy supplies, and serious winter heating problems will most likely result. Gas has

already been cut off to 72,000 homes because families have not been able to make housing payments.

Governments in these countries are only providing 30 percent of the funding officially allocated in their budgets to social welfare services. Institutions for orphans, abandoned children, the handicapped, the elderly and prisoners are overcrowded and underfunded. Staff at these institutions in many cases are receiving only a fraction or none of their salaries.

In response to these conditions, trade unions have organized a national day of demonstrations and strikes for October 7 to protest nonpayment of wages. University students and teachers have planned similar protests. Last week, hundreds of nuclear researchers and other scientists demonstrated on highways on the outskirts of Moscow, tying up traffic. According to one poll, only 8 percent of Russians said they have been unaffected by the economic crisis.



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