



The Humanitarian Update is a monthly publication from UN OCHA's Regional Office in Dubai, reporting on the main humanitarian events in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. For more information on Iraq or OPT, please visit [www.ochairaq.org](http://www.ochairaq.org) and [www.ochaopt.org](http://www.ochaopt.org)

## Saudi Arabia

» A Humanitarian Reporting Workshop was held in Riyadh on March 8-9. The workshop was the 5th in a series of humanitarian reporting workshops organized in partnership between UN OCHA, IRIN, UNHCR and UNICEF. Covering subjects such as HIV/AIDS, the international humanitarian system and international humanitarian law, these workshops aim to improve journalists' familiarity with the mechanisms and work of the United Nations in the Middle East region. The Riyadh event was hosted by Prince Ahmed bin Salman Applied Media Institute and opened by HRH Prince Faisal bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the Special Humanitarian Envoy for the Secretary General, Mr. Abdul Aziz Arrukban, and Pat Banks, Chief of OCHA's Communication and Information Service Branch. Presentations were made by representatives of UN OCHA, IRIN, UNICEF and UNHCR. There were approximately 40 participants from the print, internet and broadcast media based in Riyadh.



Humanitarian Reporting Workshop, Riyadh | Photo: / OCHA

could be also used by militants to build rockets. Egypt has currently closed its Rafah crossing into Gaza for normal traffic, providing only limited access for aid agencies. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told donors, "The situation at the border crossings is intolerable. Aid workers do not have access. Essential commodities cannot get in. Our first and indispensable goal, therefore, is open crossings. By the same token, however, it is therefore essential to ensure that illegal weapons do not enter Gaza".

The Egyptian Red Crescent Society has organized a psychological support workshop for around a hundred volunteers mobilized in El-Arish and Rafah on the border with the Gaza Strip. Other Red Cross Red Crescent societies present in Egypt such as the Qatar Red Crescent Society, in coordination with the IFRC, have also provided training in psychological support to a team of volunteers, relief workers and nurses.

## Egypt

On 2 March, donors pledged US\$4.48 billion to help the Palestinian economy and rebuild Gaza after Israel's recent military offensive during which 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed, insisting their funds bypass the territory's Hamas rulers. Gulf Arab states, the United States and the European Commission made significant pledges; Gulf Arab states pledged about US\$1.65 billion between them, stating that their donations will go through a special mechanism to be launched in Riyadh. The United Nations and aid agencies said rebuilding Gaza will be problematic so long as border crossings with Gaza remained closed. It is unclear whether Israel will open Gaza's border crossings to large quantities of supplies like cement and steel needed to rebuild, since Israel refuses the entry of materials it says

## Syria

The Resident Coordinator in Syria, Mr. Ismail Ould Sheikh Ahmed, met with the Head of State Planning Commission, Dr. Tayseer El Radawi, on 12 March. While discussing the impact of the regional drought, the senior state official stated that it had a profound impact on the level of poverty in the country. The Government of Syria has agreed that it needs three types of assistance in response to the drought: immediate/humanitarian, recovery and long-term/ Disaster Risk Reduction. Rain data for March and crops assessment in April will determine whether a new, much larger, drought appeal is needed for Syria this year. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, drought has affected some 80% of Syria's territory in the 2008/2009 winter rainy season. Mr Ahmed and Dr

Radawi agreed to organize a donors' meeting and conduct a joint assessment of the needs created by the drought.

The Food and Agriculture Office (FAO) has confirmed that the Ninewa province in north-western Iraq, bordering Syria, has been affected by a drought this year and the crops of wheat and barley may be halved. Drought is less evident in other parts of Iraq, for instance rainfall in Kurdistan was above the 10-year average. The Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture has requested FAO's technical assistance in response to the drought.

The prospect of drought in Jordan has been lessened as heavy rains towards the end of March increased the water levels well above last year's level. In mid-February, the water situation in Jordan was so critical that the Government temporarily banned all agriculture work, but a few days later the ban was lifted following the first heavy rains.

## Iran

» Seven people were killed in sudden floods in Fars Province of Iran on 31 March. The central and northern regions of Iran have also been hit by snow and cold weather, leaving many roads in the north closed; Iranian Red Crescent (IRCS) rescue workers and police helped people who were stuck. 1009 emergency temporary stations were located along the roads and more than 10,000 volunteers, ten helicopters and 800 IRCS ambulances were on stand-by. The Iranian Meteorological Organization issued an early warning about the risk of flooding in Kerman, Hormozgan, Sistan & Baluchestan, Khorasan, Gom, Tehrand and Gazvin provinces. The sudden drop of temperature is also likely to cause trees and crops to freeze.

» The unveiling ceremony for the poster of the 1st International Humanitarian Film Festival "ASA" was held in Tehran at the House of Cinema, in the presence of national and international partners of the humanitarian community, as well as famous actors, film directors and producers. The Film Festival (ASA) will take place on 27 April to 1 May, 2009 in Tehran, Iran. A variety of documentary films on a wide range of issues have already been sent to the secretariat of the Festival.



Simulation exercise organized by the Red Crescent Society. | Photo: RCS

» The Second Conference of Islamic Health Ministers was held in Tehran from 1-3 March 2009. The conference discussed possible solutions and initiatives designed to address health problems within Islamic countries, as well as how to provide equal health care services to all Islamic countries, including medical and hygiene needs in Gaza and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory. As many as 20 health ministers and representatives from 57 Islamic countries attended the Conference, which was organized by the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), the Iranian Ministry of Health, World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS.

OCHA Tehran met with the Tehran Disaster Mitigation & Management Organization (TDMMO) in order to further revise the Tehran Disaster Response Plan and identify future cooperation between the two organizations.

On 29 March the Iranian Red Crescent Society organized a simulation exercise on the Early Response Phase within the 8 provinces in Iran. This was the first time that such a simulation was undertaken simultaneously in different parts of the country. The scenario was defined for a 7.2 Richter Earthquake in order to evaluate the preparedness and time of response capacities of IRCS within the 8 provinces. 1200 relief volunteers and 300 IRCS staff participated.

## Kazakhstan

» The OCHA Humanitarian Action Training Programme took place from 10 to 12 March 2009 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The training aimed to strengthen the capacity of Humanitarian Country Team members



and Cluster Leads - including the UN, NGOs and Red Cross societies - to support governments in their response to humanitarian emergencies. The workshop covered topics such as humanitarian reform architecture, the principles of partnership and best practices from field experiences. An emphasis was placed on the specific experience and vulnerabilities of Central Asia, as well as identifying the challenges faced in humanitarian coordination and cross-sectoral emergency response. Humanitarian and development workers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan participated in the training.

## Kyrgyzstan

» Scheduled power cuts are continuing around the country - hospitals, children's shelters and institutions, and other critical institutions outside provincial centres continue to have no electricity for several hours a day. On 9 March, because of heavy snowfall, 92 power lines were cut in Chuy Province, 46 in Issyk Kul Province, 29 in Osh Province, 6 in both Jalalabat and Naryn Provinces, and 1 in Talas Province.



*Last year's harsh winter followed by low rainfall in the spring and summer of 2008 led to a depletion of Kyrgyzstan's hydroelectric resources | Photo: IRIN / Aikanysh Tashtankulova*

The revised Kyrgyzstan Flash Appeal seeks a total of US\$14,751,781. Recent confirmation of funding from Sweden for the FAO intervention will bring the total commitment of funding to \$8,590,854 - 58% of the total requested. Negotiations and awareness raising activities are ongoing with other potential donors to improve the reach of the Flash Appeal projects. CERF-funded projects have now been undertaken by UNICEF and FAO, including the supply of electric generators for centres for street children in Bishkek and Karakol, and the distribution of agricultural supplies to beneficiaries in four Provinces. Programmes by

several other agencies, including UNHCR and WFP, are also well underway across the country.

Mercy Corps has reported that the take-up of commodities as part of its supplemental feeding programme has been much quicker than in previous years, possibly indicating a rise in food insecurity. On 11 March, Prime Minister Chudinov issued a decree on monitoring and indicators of food security. The system will be designed to ensure that the government can regulate and develop short-and long-term measures to ensure the food security of the population.

## Uzbekistan

» UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's Transport Division, in collaboration with Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, Investment and Trade, held a policy-level Expert Group Meeting on the Operationalization of International Intermodal Transport Corridors in North-East and Central Asia, from 4 to 5 March, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The meeting reviewed the current status of identified intermodal transport corridors linking North-East and Central Asia, including routes of the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway networks. The meeting also aimed to agree on and recommend two to three priority corridors for in-depth study.

## Tajikistan

» On 26 March, the World Bank's Board of Executive Directors approved the US\$20 million Third Programmatic Development Policy Grant to help the Government of Tajikistan mitigate the impact of the global economic slowdown, and to help it continue to implement its medium-term reform programme. The aim of the grant is to safeguard Tajikistan's ongoing reform and poverty reduction programme by helping to fill the financing gap created by the global economic crisis. Tajikistan's growth is expected to fall to 3 per cent in 2009, one-third the rate of expansion of 9 percent enjoyed during 2000-2007, due mainly to the drop in remittances from Tajik nationals working in Russia and to a decline in exports of cotton and other commodities. The crisis has put pressure on the government to increase its expenditures on social services to help migrant workers returning to Tajikistan and others who have lost their jobs, while the necessary state revenues to deliver these social services have fallen as economic activity slows. The

grant will be provided as direct budget support, and will help sustain the confidence of investors by supporting policies to promote macroeconomic stability, encourage private investment, and to create a professional public service. Specifically, the grant helps the authorities to reduce the regulatory burden on business and ensure that privatization of state owned enterprises is carried out transparently and fairly. It is the third such operation supporting the government's reform program laid out in Tajikistan's first and second poverty reduction strategies.

Humanitarian assistance to Tajikistan has amounted to US\$16.5 million so far this year. The State Statistics Committee stated that the assistance came from 26 countries. The largest share of the humanitarian aid came from the USA (51.8%), Latvia (12.3%), and Germany (9.7%).

## Yemen

- » There have been several suicide bomb attacks in Yemen towards the end of March. In the first attack, on Sunday 15 March, four Korean tourists and their Yemeni guide were killed in the city of Shibam in Hadramut. According to Associated Press News Agency reports, the Yemeni authorities have said that al-Qaeda were behind the attack and that 12 suspects were arrested. A second attack took place on Wednesday 18 March near Sanaa airport, but there were no reported fatalities.
- » The French Navy helped rescue scores of Somali and Ethiopian people on Saturday 21 March, but at least seven of them drowned when their vessel capsized shortly after docking in the Yemeni port of Aden. Five people are missing and presumed dead. The incident occurred as passengers tried to disembark from the smugglers' boat, which had just been towed to the Yemeni coast by a French frigate that had found it adrift and taking on water in the Gulf of Aden, about 200 km from Aden and 86 km off the coast of Yemen. The crew of the French frigate, Floreal, stopped the leak and then towed the boat, which was carrying 104 people, to Aden. As it docked at a pier, the passengers all rushed to disembark, causing the vessel to founder. French sailors and the Yemeni coastguard rescued 85 passengers and four of the smugglers, who were later arrested. Nineteen of the passengers were taken to a hospital in Aden for medical treatment, while 66 people were transferred



*Small fishing boats such as this one carry up to 125 people when used to smuggle migrants from the Somali coast across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen (file photo) | Photo: UNHCR/K.McKinsey*

to the compound of a local aid agency. So far this year, a total of 260 boats and 13,250 people have made the perilous Gulf of Aden crossing from the Horn of Africa to the Yemen coast. As of 23 March, 54 people have been reported dead and 36 missing at sea.

## Qatar

- » On 3-4 March Qatar hosted the League of Arab States Conference for Humanitarian and Development Agencies. The Conference was attended by representatives from humanitarian organizations from across the Arab world, including Iraq, Yemen, Qatar and Egypt.

## Kuwait

- » On 5 March, the Islamic International Charitable Organisation organized a one-day conference on International Humanitarian Law and Gaza. Panelists included representatives from the ICRC's Regional Delegation, UN OCHA's Regional Office, the Kuwait University and the Ministry of Justice.

## Regional

- » The Arab League Summit took place in Doha on 29 March. The leaders, meeting under the 22-member Arab League, sought to bury differences highlighted by their responses to Israel's offensive on the Gaza Strip in December last year. There were several notable absentees at the Summit, including Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir attended the Summit, which said it would not enforce the International Criminal Court's arrest order issued on 4 March. Arab countries have been critical of the international tribunal's decision to issue



the arrest warrant, arguing it would further destabilize Sudan as the Darfur conflict enters its seventh year. In a news conference Saturday, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa said the League will "continue our efforts to halt the implementation of the warrant," including asking the U.N. Security Council to halt the case against al-Bashir.

From 20 March to 1 April, the Government of Oman hosted the first United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) Induction course to be held in the region. The aim of the course was to induct new members into the UNDAC team, prepare them for rapid deployment to sudden-onset emergencies to assist the national authorities and United Nations in-country with coordination of the international response. Ultimately, the objective of these courses is to strengthen

the Emergency Relief Coordinator's capacity to provide support to governments of disaster-affected countries and/or the UN system in-country, through deployment of an UNDAC team to assist in sudden-onset emergencies. 34 persons from 22 countries and organisations participated in the Muscat training.

A "Strengthening Resident Coordinators & Humanitarian Coordinators Workshop" took place in Cairo from 2-4 March, supported by UN OCHA's Regional Office. The workshop was attended by over 70 participants and discussed humanitarian coordination; roles and responsibilities of RC/HCs; proposed new Terms of Reference for RCs; disaster risk reduction; contingency planning; strengthening partnerships in the region; and support resources in an emergency.

### Upcoming Events

**1-2 April:** USAID/OFDA Mission Disaster Preparedness Consultation in Almaty

**6 April:** "An Introduction to the International Humanitarian System" Workshop, Dubai, UAE

**7-10 April:** Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development (DIHAD) Conference and Exhibition

**06-10 April:** UNHCR Emergency and Disaster Management Workshop for Central Asia, Astana

**15-16 April:** 2nd meeting of the Regional Disaster Preparedness and Response Centre Working Group

**20-22 April:** Humanitarian Forum Steering Committee Meeting, Istanbul, Turkey

**20-24 April:** Kyrgyz REACT Field Coordination and Rapid Response Training, Osh and Bishkek

**21-23 April:** EADRCC Main planning exercise

**27 April:** UN OCHA/ Humanitarian Forum Familiarisation workshop to the international humanitarian system, Sana'a, Yemen

For more information, please contact:

**Nadia Evans**, OCHA Dubai, 00971 50 2279808, [evans2@un.org](mailto:evans2@un.org)

### Useful Links

[www.reliefweb.org](http://www.reliefweb.org)

[www.humanitarianappeal.net](http://www.humanitarianappeal.net)

[www.ochaopt.org](http://www.ochaopt.org)

[www.ochairaq.org](http://www.ochairaq.org)

[www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org)

<http://cerf.un.org>

[www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)

[www.wfp.org](http://www.wfp.org)