

Outlook Special Edition, April 2006

Earthquakes in Lorestan

Concern for quake-affected children and families

A series of earthquakes measuring between 4.7 and 5.7 on the Richter scale struck Lorestan province, in western Iran, during the night and morning of 30 and 31 March.

Reacting to initial tremors earlier in the evening, many people left their homes to seek safe shelter, resulting in relatively few casualties – 70 deaths and 1,300 injuries were reported. Nonetheless, the earthquakes were devastating, disrupting the lives of more than 221,000 people and causing the widespread destruction of thousands of buildings. It is estimated that 36,000 children are affected by this disaster.

A total of 130 schools in the worst affected areas were completely destroyed. Many others were damaged beyond repair or are considered too unsafe to use.

“Children are among the most vulnerable during a crisis,” says Christian Salazar Volkmann, UNICEF Representative. “In this case, children have already spent many nights outside in the cold, increasing their risk of illness and taking a toll on their psychological well being.”

Salazar Volkmann visited the region within days of the earthquake, helping to coordinate the distribution of 10,000 blankets and nearly 300 tents immediately provided by UNICEF. This was the first international aid to reach the area and complemented the national relief efforts. “The supplies add to the immediate response of the Government and the Iranian Red Crescent who reacted quickly by distributing tents, blankets, food items and other equipment,” he said.

More than 100 strong aftershocks have kept fearful residents from returning to their homes. In the city of Boroujerd, displaced families sleep in cars, tents and makeshift shelters in road medians, parks, sidewalks and open areas, despite extremely cold temperatures.

A team consisting of child protection and education experts from UNICEF and UNESCO assessed the damage to educational facilities and the psychological situation of children. Based on their findings, a plan of action will be developed for Government agencies and UNICEF to assist children in returning to school and overcoming the psychological stress and trauma caused by the earthquake.

Children among the most vulnerable

Seven-year-old Mehdi Yarahmadi’s school books were among the possessions his family managed to save before the earthquakes struck his village last week. Initial tremors warned them of the coming quake, and the family took shelter after saving some essential household furnishings – thus escaping serious injury or death.



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Mehdi’s father, Ahmad Yarahmadi, encourages his young son to study for a few hours each day. Maintaining this kind of regular routine is extremely important for children in crisis situations, as it helps relieve some of the stress they feel.

Although the Yarahmadi family salvaged many of their belongings, their house is badly damaged and not safe to reoccupy.

“I lost my two cows, which were feeding us,” said Mr. Yarahmadi. “I don’t know how I will rebuild my house. I don’t have any money or income to pay for that.”

The Department of Education and State Welfare Organization are working to re-establish temporary schools and recreation facilities in tents as soon as possible. The Red Crescent has donated several tents for this purpose and an additional six tents with the capacity to hold 50 students each were released by the Bam Department of Education, who received them from UNICEF after the earthquake there.

The State Welfare Organization and UNICEF will also re-establish 25 rural child care centres (kindergartens) for children under age six. Training will be provided to staff at these centres on trauma counselling and psychosocial support. These measures will help return a sense of normalcy for children and provide them with a safe place to play and learn during the reconstruction process.

Another young quake survivor, Ali Biroonvand, 15, is eager to get back to school and meet his friends again. "But the earthquake took away my books and my homework," he said. Although Ali tried to go to school on Monday, when classes were supposed to restart after the Persian New Year holidays, he was told it was too dangerous and that students were not allowed in. The manager of Ali's school, which serves 260 students in the village of Darb-e Astaneh, told UNICEF he was trying to get enough books and stationery to be able to start classes again next week.



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UNICEF's School-in-a-box kits

One of the most urgent needs for children in emergency situations is the resumption of education activities. UNICEF can support this by providing 'school-in-a-box' kits with supplies for up to 80 students.

In addition to basic school supplies such as exercise books, pencils, erasers and scissors, the kit also includes a wooden teaching clock, plastic cubes for counting and a set of three laminated posters (alphabet, multiplication and number tables). The kit is supplied in a locked aluminium box, the lid of which can double as a blackboard when coated with the special paint included in the kit.

The contents of the kit are not culturally specific and should be supplemented by locally purchased products, such as books, toys and games. Elements of the kit have been adapted so that they can be used anywhere in the world. For example, exercise books are printed without margins, so that children who write right to left can use them. The poster set was created for adaptability as well. The posters are printed with spaces in which the teacher can either draw or write numbers and letters in the local language.

In Iran, Ministry of Education officials have been working with UNICEF since the earthquake in Bam to design a locally appropriate kit containing materials in Farsi such as alphabet and multiplication tables.

UNICEF actions part of coordinated UN response

A UN rapid assessment team consisting of representatives from UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted an assessment visit to the affected areas to get a detailed picture of the damage and make recommendations for a coordinated response.

United Nations agencies have so far made \$450,000 in aid available for the people of Lorestan. This comes in the form of tents, blankets, heaters, water storage containers, generators, kitchen sets, water purification kits and emergency health supplies. Further support will come in the form of training and capacity building for local personnel. UNICEF, UNFPA, WHO, UNDP and the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have provided the financial aid and other assistance.

The Rapid Assessment team suggests a two-pronged strategy for the people of the affected area: 1) immediate emergency relief interventions and 2) short and medium-term recovery measures.



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How you can help

You can help UNICEF provide relief to the children of Lorestan by making a cash donation to the following account:

Melli Bank

Account # 5005 (UNICEF), Eskan Branch, Tehran
(payable in all Melli Banks)