UNICEF Situation Report No. 1
Drought Situation Republic of the Marshall Islands
Date: 10 May 2013

Reporting period – 01–10 May 2013

I. Situation Overview
A state of emergency declared 19 April in the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) was elevated to a declaration of a state of disaster on 7 May as a prolonged severe drought affecting northern atolls and islands continues unabated. Depletion of wells and water catchments, salinization of ground water and insufficient desalination capacity have left an estimated 5,000 people without enough drinking water or adequate food. Children and families health and lives are at risk.

Since January 2013, 13 local governments (atolls/islands) have requested emergency assistance from the national government. In a usual period of below normal rainfall, three to four islands request such assistance. The scale and duration of this drought has outstripped the national government’s resources to respond, and international assistance has been formally requested.

Weather forecasts predict the dry conditions and below-normal rainfall patterns are expected to last through July. Seasonal rainfall is expected to increase in June-July, however, it will take several months after normal rainfall commences for groundwater to be replenished and longer still for food crops to recover.
Public media estimates state that 5,000 people in northern atolls are experiencing severe drought conditions, with an additional 11,000 people who may also be affected by crop loss and continued dry weather. Staple foods are especially critical in these outer islands communities, which are remote, often lack modern services, and transport to the Northern islands is posing severe logistical challenges. Given the unique transport and logistical challenges of reaching these remote, isolated communities, the urgency of response is critical.

Assessment reports from four atolls (est. pop. 1,500 people) found that Reverse Osmosis (RO) units were not fully operational on the islands. On most atolls surveyed majority of domestic water tanks are 100% empty and water from a high proportion of wells was considered unsafe to drink due to bacterial contamination and salinity levels.

The assessment reports highlighted the high risk concerns for health issues, particularly relating to diarrhoea in children. On one atoll, Mejit, 12 gastritis cases were recorded, half among children. There had also been cases of diarrhoea with vomiting, abdominal pain, fever amongst children and hepatitis. On Utrik atoll, 57 cases of gastritis were reported and nine cases of hepatitis during the drought period (no age breakdown provided). On 7 May, the RMI Minister of Health confirmed that there have been cases of diarrhea and influenza, and that more medications and pharmaceuticals would be needed.

Food crops are also reportedly devastated due to the prolonged drought. Emergency relief supplies include rice and tinned vegetables, however, it is unclear if food supplies meet nutritional requirements for children and pregnant and lactating mothers.

The government’s national disaster committee has dispatched two national ships, the MV Landrik and MV Ribuka, to affected atolls with water, food and other emergency supplies. All available reverse osmosis machines have already been dispatched, however, reports indicate that these measures will be inadequate.

Following requests for international assistance USAID/OFDA and AusAID have responded with grants of approximately US$ 100,000 each to support logistics and additional desalination units. OCHA has provided an Emergency Cash Grant of $50,000 to assist with immediate response efforts.

A three-member United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team has been deployed to RMI to assist with response coordination, assessments and information management for an initial two week period. The RMI Government will also receive an OCHA Emergency Cash Grant of US$50,000.

The PHT WASH cluster lead by UNICEF has been activated. On 7 May, the Pacific Humanitarian Team met and held a conference call with the RMI Chief Secretary and (National Disaster Committee Chair) to discuss the current assessment results, outstanding needs and current levels of international support. The PHT WASH cluster has been activated on 7 May.

II. Humanitarian Needs

- Key humanitarian issues are mainly access to clean and safe drinking water for an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 people.
- Immediate needs include additional reverse osmosis units, delivery of water bladders and water purification supplies, immediate and long-term assistance on food security, and a crisis support plan for communicable health issues.
- There have been confirmed cases of diarrhea and influenza, and the RMI Minister of Health has confirmed the need for medications and pharmaceuticals.
- Assessments are still taking place with no data received as yet by gender, age, or geographical area.

III. Inter-Agency Collaboration, Coordination, Cluster Leadership and Key Partnerships
Humanitarian Coordination Structure

- UNICEF is working closely with OCHA and the Pacific Humanitarian Team partners to provide support to the RMI government. In the capital Majuro, a UN Country Development Manager is attending meetings on behalf of the United Nations. UNICEF is coordinating the Pacific WASH Cluster in close collaboration with counterparts.
- A WASH Cluster Coordinator is on standby however OCHA has sent a staff member to the capital, Majuro to support information coordination and two others have been mobilized through UNDAC. In addition USAID has sent a Water Specialist and Food Security Specialist.

Partnerships with INGOs, NGOs

- UNICEF is working closely with partners of the Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) to respond to immediate needs of children in RMI.

IV. UNICEF Response

WASH Programme Response
UNICEF has offered the deployment of a WASH cluster coordinator to Majuro, and is currently awaiting confirmation from government of RMI, OCHA and USAID.

UNICEF has shared key messages previously used for the Tuvalu drought in 2011 promoting good protection of food, nutrition and hygiene practices for families. Messages include washing hands, boiling all drinking water, continuing to exclusively breastfeed infants under six months old and not eating spoiled food.

Nutrition
UNICEF Nutrition Specialist is in contact with the Ministry of Health in RMI to provide technical guidance and ensure food supplies are nutritionally balance and appropriate for infants and children.

Supply and Logistics
A list of emergency WASH and Health supplies such as hygiene kits, water quality testing kits and oral rehydration salts (ORS) has been shared with government counterparts in RMI today. As soon as a response is received (including initial distribution plan) supplies will be sent by air.

Media and communication
Radio spots developed for the Tuvalu drought in 2011 have been shared along with samples of communication materials i.e. pocket guide and emergency hands with ten key messages. The messages focus mainly on hygiene and sanitation such as hand washing, boiling water before drinking and keeping food safe. They are in English and can be translated into the local language.

Key spokesperson is Ms. Isabelle Austin (Deputy Representative) or Samantha Cocco-Klein (OIC). For any interviews, please contact Ms. Donna Hoerder (Communications Specialist- External Relations), 679 – 3236 111 or 679 - 9265 518.

Funding
There are no funding appeals yet however UNICEF will begin fundraising with key donors and NatComs should the need for funding arise.

Next steps
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Next SitRep is scheduled for May 17th, 2013
For further information please contact

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