

Date: 24 April 2004

Ref: OCHA/GVA - 2004/0062

OCHA Situation Report No. 2 Democratic People's Republic of Korea – Explosion in Ryongchon County Occurred on 22 April 2004

This report is based on the information provided by the UN Humanitarian/Resident Coordinator's office in Pyongyang and the Inter-Agency assessment mission conducted by the UN Country team together with IFRC, ICRC, ECHO and NGOs today.

Event and Impact

1. The Government has now confirmed that there was a large explosion at Ryongchon Station, Ryongchon County, North Phyongan Province, and that it occurred during shunting operations at the city railway station. Two train wagons carrying ammonium nitrate came into contact with a wagon containing fuel oil. Each wagon contained 40 MT of ammonium nitrate. This resulted in a massive explosion creating a large crater and leveling everything in a 500 m radius.
2. According to the Government the explosives were enroute to a construction site for the Pakma-cheol san irrigation project.
3. The Flood Disaster Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) of Ryongchon County confirmed that, as of 14:00 local time today, the explosion injured approximately 1,300 people, 370 of which were hospitalized. So far, 154 bodies have been recovered, including 76 children. Five people are reported missing. Ryongchon County has a population of 123,200 people, of whom 27,000 live in the county city.
4. Due to the damage sustained by local medical facilities, approximately 370 people were evacuated to the Provincial Hospital in Sinuiju City, 20 km from Ryongchon. Due to the overall lack of resources in the health sector, there are concerns about their treatment. It is anticipated that WHO will undertake a health needs assessment in Sinuiju City within the next few days to identify how best the international community can assist the Ministry of Public Health.
5. The explosion also caused major damage to housing and infrastructure, including schools and medical facilities. 1,850 houses were either destroyed or rendered unsafe due to the explosion. Most of these houses were single story dwellings. An estimated 1,850 families (approximately 8,000 people) have been made homeless by the accident. This represents approximately 40 per cent of the area of the township. Public buildings suffered major damage; 12 were completely destroyed and 10 partially destroyed.
6. The city's water supply, electricity and telephone systems have been severely disrupted. Further technical assessments of the damage to utilities are required to ascertain the full extent of the damage.

Assessment and needs

7. In response to a formal request from the Government, an Inter-Agency assessment mission was conducted on Saturday 24 April in the affected area. Mission participants included OCHA, UNICEF, WHO, WFP, FAO, IFRC, ICRC, ECHO, Concern Worldwide, German AgroAction, and Premiere Urgence. Representatives from a number of diplomatic missions, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, China, Russia, Poland, and Bulgaria also visited the site with the Inter-Agency Mission.

8. The Inter-Agency Assessment mission confirmed that Ryongchon County city had suffered a significant loss of life and experienced extensive damage to housing and infrastructure. The mission has assessed that there is no need for international assistance in search and rescue operations, and there are sufficient resources already allocated to meet the most basic short-term needs of the affected population.

9. However, subsequent technical assessments including WHO's health needs assessment in Sinuiju City will be undertaken to identify additional relief and rehabilitation needs. There exists considerable immediate rehabilitation needs to provide shelter to affected families, as well as repair damaged health facilities, schools and utilities.

National and International Response

10. The national authorities and the National Red Cross effectively responded to the disaster. Immediately following the explosion, the local branch of the National Red Cross mobilized 398 Red Cross volunteers to assist in the rescue efforts. A Red Cross First Aid Post was established at the site coordinating the treatment of the injured. Red Cross volunteers continue to provide assistance at the site.

11. The Ministry of Public Health also responded to the disaster by sending medical supplies from Pyongyang to Ryongchon County early yesterday morning. This was followed by a visit of the Minister for Public Health yesterday.

12. Red Cross volunteers, working at the Red Cross Disaster Preparedness Warehouse in Sinuiju, worked during the night of 23 April to prepare relief items for distribution to up to 2,000 affected families. Distribution of relief items to homeless families commenced today. Relief items distributed by the Red Cross included kitchen sets, blankets, water purification tablets (3 month supply), plastic sheeting and water containers. The FDRC is in the process of relocating affected families to emergency accommodation with relatives, friends or undamaged public buildings in the County.

13. Medicines and medical supplies from UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC available in-country have been reallocated from existing programmes and delivered to Ryongchon County today.

14. In addition to the relief assistance already delivered to the area, WFP and German-Agro Action have pledged food aid for up to 15,000 vulnerable people in the city for four months to assist with relief and recovery efforts. The Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang donated US\$5,000 directly to the County for rehabilitation activities.

15. The UN system has made available emergency grants in response to the disaster. This includes US\$50,000 from OCHA, \$50,000 from UNDP and \$25,000 from WHO.

16. OCHA is prepared to serve as a channel for cash contributions to be used for immediate relief assistance, in coordination with relevant organizations in the United Nations system. **For banking details please contact the desk officers indicated below.** OCHA provides donor

governments with written confirmation and pertinent details concerning the utilization of the funds contributed.

17. Due to the possible environmental impacts of ammonium nitrate, OCHA is prepared to mobilize specialized international assistance to cope with possible environmental aspects of the disaster. This offer has been communicated to the DPRK Government. OCHA is in contact with its Office in Pyongyang, and will revert with further information, as it becomes available.

18. This situation report, together with further information on ongoing emergencies, is also available on the OCHA Internet Website at <http://www.reliefweb.int>

Telephone: +41-22-917 12 34	Fax: +41-22-917 00 23	E-mail: ochagva@un.org
In case of emergency only:	Tel. +41-22-917 20 10	
Desk Officers:	Mr. S. Nakajima / Mr. R. Mena Direct Tel. +41-22-917 4034 /1455	
Press contact: (GVA)	Ms. Elizabeth Byrs	direct Tel. +41-22-917 26 53
(N.Y.)	Ms. Stephanie Bunker	direct Tel. +1-212-963 87 40