

# ***CENTRAL AMERICA: HURRICANE CESAR***

*18 March, 1997*

*appeal no. 11/96*

*situation report no. 1 (Final)*

*period covered: July to November 1996*

## ***The disaster***

On 26 July, a tropical depression developed off the coasts of Venezuela and Colombia. It turned into a hurricane -- named Cesar -- and swept through Nicaragua and Costa Rica. In Nicaragua, it entered 40 kilometres north of the city of Bluefields (Department of Zelaya) passed through the Departments of Chontales, Boaco, Matagalpa, León and left the country by Chinandega. As Cesar approached the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica it picked up a large cloud mass, causing heavy flooding along the rivers in the southern river basins, in the provinces of San Jose and Puntarenas.

In *Nicaragua* the rains caused hardship for 2,235 families in the above-mentioned departments. Food shortages were created by crop damage (sugar, corn, yucca, bananas, ajonjoli); the infrastructure was seriously damaged, as were private homes, the communications network and roads.

In *Costa Rica* 14,026 square kilometres of land were affected, particularly in the cantons of Pérez Zeledón and Osa. Approximately 30,000 persons (6,000 families) out of a total population of 451,496 inhabitants were affected. Official reports put the number of dead at 39. Fourteen temporary shelters were set up to care for about 4,500 persons.

Much of the infrastructure was damaged. Bridges, main and local road surfaces, schools, health centres and hospitals were damaged or destroyed, seriously affecting local production systems. The southern interamerican highway had cave-ins up to 15 metres deep and thousand of holes along 115 kilometres.

## ***The appeal***

After a preliminary appeal on 2 August, covering only Nicaragua, the Federation issued a final appeal on 9 August for CHF 1,134,000, representing CHF 410,000 for Nicaragua and CHF 724,000 for Costa Rica. The total response was CHF 997,385. Budgets for the two operations were adjusted proportionally.

Initially, the *Nicaraguan Red Cross (NRC)* undertook prevention measures, using the local television and radio; at the same time, in co-ordination with public bodies, it put its Emergency Plan into action. On 30 July it turned to the Federation for help. An initial Federation appeal, for CHF 390,260, was issued on 2 August and CHF 50,000 was released from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund. This amount remained practically unchanged when the Federation's final appeal was issued on 9 August. The sum was required to help feed 1,832 families identified out of the total of 2,235 affected families (600 families of Zelaya were assisted by USAID) for three months. Financial support totalling US\$ 190,000 came from the governments of Germany, Sweden, Japan, Netherlands, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Monaco; US\$ 10,000 was given by the government of Spain to cover operative costs.

The *Costa Rican Red Cross (CRC)* appeal for international aid was included in the Federation's final appeal on 9 August. It sought CHF 724,000 to help feed 2,000 families victims of the disaster. US\$ 510,970 were donated immediately. An ECHO grant through the Spanish RC of CHF 470,000 constituted 68.7% of the financial support required. The remaining 31.3% came from the governments of Canada, Iceland, Japan, Sweden, Monaco and Norway, and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), via the Canadian RC.

## *The operation*

In *Nicaragua*, the operation started on 16 August once all funds had been received, and was closed out on 8 October. The objective was to provide basic food kits (food, oil, cooking utensils) to 1,832 families suffering hardship caused by hurricane Cesar, for two months. The identification of the beneficiaries took place from 19 to 31 August in Chinandega, León and Rivas; and from 16 to 20 September in León.

The supplies were purchased and packaged with the participation of some members of the community and distributed in 20 person teams, from 2 to 26 September. The transport to the different zones was made using two pick ups in each zone plus 17 trucks and ten vans. The distribution of 244,35 tonnes of goods, made through 12 distribution posts, ended on 28 September.

The State, via the Dirección Nacional de Defensa Civil, and the government, via local authorities, were kept informed throughout the entire operation. Donor states' ambassadors had regular contacts with the Nicaraguan RC.

In *Costa Rica*, once the budget had been revised, the Spanish RC confirmed that funds were available to begin the operation on 26 August. The objective was to provide family parcels comprising foodstuffs, comfort items, cooking utensils and blankets to 2,000 families affected by floods caused by Hurricane Cesar in the cantons of Pérez Zeledón, Buenos Aires, Osa and Parrita, for two months (September and October). The goods were purchased from the National Production Board, the Government's main provider of food even in times of national emergency. A contract was worked out with this institution on 4 October.

Identification of beneficiaries, using the criteria of direct hurricane effects, poverty and unemployment, was carried out by 32 relief workers from the local RC branches and Social Welfare Institute technical staff members. In all, 295 tons of goods were distributed.

Another operational objective that ran parallel to the distributions was the organisation of basic community training in disaster prevention and response. A workshop for facilitators was held in San Isidro de Pérez Zeledón from 16 to 18 October. It was attended by 25 persons from the affected communities and financed with funds donated by the Canadian Red Cross. The facilitators undertook to organise similar workshops in their communities within the next four months.

The Government, via the National Emergency Commission, and the State, via the Joint Social Welfare Institute, were involved in assistance, co-ordination and monitoring. The Costa Rican Petroleum Refinery (RECOPE) lent vehicles for distribution activities; and the Pan-American Health Organisation's SUMA Project lent radios and computers.

### ***Initial action***

From the very beginning both the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan Societies were involved in assisting victims, using staff from their local branches and their central headquarters. They promoted national level donations and distribution of food and clothing to those in need.

The Federation sent a Delegate to Nicaragua who helped the NS with the preparation of the appeal and stayed throughout the operation. Another Federation delegate worked in Costa Rica for the duration of the operation. Both were supported by the Federation's Regional Delegation in San José. The Spanish RC also made a delegate available to the Costa Rica RC.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details.

## ***Conclusion***

The combined efforts of the National Societies, the Federation and the population involved ensured that assistance reached the most vulnerable. This local involvement proved an important factor: it encouraged many people to become interested in participating in local disaster prevention and response measures.

Both NS achieved their initial objectives thanks to two factors: co-ordination between the various institutions during the operation and the previous experience of their members in relief operations.

The Costa Rican and Nicaraguan RC benefited from the training and reorganisation of work procedures for many of their staff, based on the implementation and use of innovative relief methods and with direct advice from the Federation delegates.

The relief operation showed that the Costa Rican RC's accounting department needs to be redesigned so that it can provide efficient, effective financial control and management of accounting information, and help take decisions during an emergency situation.

In both countries, training of rural and urban populations vulnerable to natural disasters should be pursued.

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