

CENTRAL AMERICA: FLOODS AND LANDSLIDES

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The Disaster

Heavy rains accompanying tropical storms have battered most parts of Central America, specifically Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, for more than two weeks. They are causing fatalities (over 60 deaths have been confirmed), injuries, widespread evacuations of over 22,000 persons and serious damage, particularly to the already weakened infrastructure of those countries severely damaged by Hurricane *Mitch* last year.

These rains were to be expected at this time of year, but because of the extreme vulnerability of some of these countries, the situation is becoming very serious. Rivers that filled up with mud and gravel during *Mitch* have not been dredged and are now overflowing. Roads that have not been repaired are now being washed away. The earth is becoming saturated by the rainfall causing more and more frequent mud-slides, especially along high risk slopes where many of the most vulnerable live.

The governments of El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and, yesterday, Nicaragua have all declared "Red Emergency Alerts".

In **Mexico**, in the states of Veracruz, Chiapas, Jalisco and Oaxaca have been largely affected by the floods. Veracruz has evacuated twelve communities. These are among the most marginalised states as far as access to government assistance. Some communities in Oaxaca, among the most vulnerable, were affected both by the flooding and the recent earthquake. There are still remote areas where neither the Mexican Red Cross nor the government have been able to do a damage assessment.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Costa Rica: The government declared a state of emergency and assistance has been concentrated on the worst hit areas of Guanacaste, Puntarenas, Limón, Cartago, Alajuela and San José where rivers have flooded and cut off communities. Last estimates were of 5,372 people having been evacuated to 44 shelters, and damages reported to bridges, roads, aqueducts, sewage systems, homes and schools. The National Emergency Commission (CNE) has set up an Operations Centre with a local co-ordination office in Filadelfia in Guanacaste.

The Costa Rican Red Cross (CRC) evacuated 1,284 persons into temporary shelters in the Pacific zone with an additional 1,500 possible evacuees in Filadelfia to be moved into shelters at the University of Costa Rica in Liberia.

CRC staff were involved in rescue and auxiliary services. The Relief Department has mobilised one Disaster Intervention officer to lead a multi-disciplinary team of 35 persons, together with all terrain, radio-equipped vehicles. A total of 120 volunteers have also been mobilised. In affected areas the CRC is

involved in evacuations, first aid, needs assessments and co-ordination with the government's Emergency Plan.

El Salvador: A Red Alert was issued on 29 September by the government's emergency agency, COEN, mobilising contingency and response mechanisms. Some 3,000 persons have been evacuated in the worst hit areas including parts of San Salvador. A UNDP/UNICEF Team is assisting in the assessment of vulnerable populations in the Lempa region where the WFP is also providing food aid to some 1,090 families. PAHO/WHO are evaluating the epidemiological risk of malaria and leptospirosis.

The Salvadorean Red Cross has mobilised 74 staff and more than 180 volunteers, transport vehicles and relief goods to support its branches in the worst hit areas of Herradura, department of La Paz. The Red Cross was active in search and rescue efforts in the early days of the crisis.

Guatemala: The government's disaster agency (CONRED) has reported wide spread casualties and damages, with details summarised in the table below. Fire brigade volunteers and public health workers are involved in the response. In Zacapa and Chiquimula, landslides have affected 730 persons and damaged homes and destroyed crops. On the Pacific coast, 1,553 persons were affected after their homes were damaged by water levels exceeding one metre. The Guatemalan Red Cross is reviewing possible interventions in support of CONRED. The Regional Delegation is in contact with the Society's Disaster Services department and will provide additional support to that of the Participating National Societies (PNS) if the situation deteriorates.

Honduras: Authorities have had to continue to discharge water from the El Cajón dam to decrease the pressure but are increasing flooding risks downstream. Eleven bridges are reported destroyed and another six are damaged. The USAID has provided USD25,000 for procurement of essential utensils and plastic sheeting.

The Honduran Red Cross (HRC) has been active alerting the population to the situation and helping with evacuations, in co-ordination with the local police, army and fire brigade.

The Honduran government has now requested the HRC to take over the administration of shelters for a maximum period of three months, to house evacuees now housed in schools and churches. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) will construct the new shelters with plastic sheeting donated by the USAID. Some 3,600 units will be built to house the homeless. More than 800 families (or some 3,000 persons) have lost their homes in the recent rains and that number is expected to go up.

The HRC, the International Federation and the Participating National Societies are monitoring the situation closely, identifying needs for assistance. The American Red Cross has distributed emergency aid to seven HRC branches in the departments of Intibucá, Frc. Morazán, Olancho and Copán, including 2,800 blankets, 2,300 water containers and 2,800 hygiene kits. Three branches have already distributed this aid to 407 displaced families. In the department of Cortés, the HRC has set up a portable water purification plant.

The Spanish Red Cross has distributed water purification tablets and water containers to 250 families in the department of Copán and has also distributed water purification tablets, water containers, beans, matches, clothes and kitchen sets to three branches in Cortés.

Nicaragua: The west and north west regions of the country are experiencing the worst of the flooding. In Nueva Segovia, many communities are in a critical condition and the government has commenced some preliminary distribution of basic food assistance packages. The government is particularly concerned by

damage to most secondary roads that are cutting off access to many communities and a priority has been declared to repair these routes. There are also some concerns regarding respiratory infections, diarrhoea, and skin infections that are emerging as a result of the flooding.

The Nicaraguan Red Cross (NRC) has activated 240 volunteers, equipped with trucks and pick-ups. Additional support is provided by the PNS and the Federation. Over 64 tonnes of relief and hygiene materials, blankets and water purification stock have been supplied from central warehouses and distributed to the affected branches. Some food parcels have been distributed in Sabana Grande and Belén.

	Honduras	Nicaragua	Guatemala	El Salvador	Costa Rica	Total
Evacuatees	12,604	1,563	3,740	4,567	5,372	27,846
Fatalities	23	11	12	7	9	62
Destroyed or Damage	11 bridges 21 roads 1017 houses	3 bridges 34 roads 294 houses	780 houses	3 bridges	12 bridges 300 km roads	29 bridges 2091 houses 55 main roads 300 km

Needs

Costa Rica: The Federation has released CHF 50,000 from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to assist the Costa Rican Red Cross in its relief operation.

The American Red Cross has donated USD 10,000 through the Regional Delegation to the CRC for rescue and communications equipment, basic food support, hygiene kits and water purification materials. The Regional Delegation is also in discussions with the Spanish Red Cross for assistance to be sent to Costa Rica. It is not planned to launch an Emergency Appeal at this time.

El Salvador: The Salvadorean Red Cross is in need of food, clothes and vehicles. The Federation is coordinating the support to the National Society with the Participating National Societies already present in country for the *Mitch* Operation.

Honduras: The HRC is evaluating, together with the Federation and the American, Spanish, Netherlands, Canadian, German, Swiss and Italian Red Cross Societies' what additional assistance they may require should the conditions continue to deteriorate. Existing contingency reserves and supplies are sufficient and at this moment an Emergency Appeal is not being considered. The Director of the Americas has been in contact with the President of the HRC to discuss future assistance strategies if they become necessary.

Nicaragua: The NRC is currently coping with its own resources and additional support provided by the Federation and the PNS working in the country. The main needs are blankets, kitchen utensils, and some basic food support. Additional funds may be required to reinforce stocks, operational expenses and logistics if the situation deteriorates further.

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