

CARIBBEAN: HURRICANE KEITH

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The Disaster

Hurricane Keith is currently moving in a west-north west direction along the Yucatan Peninsula. It has been downgraded to a tropical depression and heavy rains continue to affect Belize and the Yucatan Peninsula. There is a strong probability that flash floods will occur, together with mud slides in the interior of the Yucatan. It is feared that towns may be cut off by life-threatening flash floods.

On 2 October 2000, the Government of Belize declared a national state of emergency, and the Belize Defence Force has been called out. The International Airport remains closed. The National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) reports that currently the key threat is flooding and that procedures are in place for evacuation from flooded areas and for search and rescue operations.

Floods are expected to become more severe since rivers continue to swell, but great overflows of water has already destroyed sugar cane plantations. The northern highway remains under water and the Belmopan road is flooded in sections. Electricity has been cut in most of Belize City, but is expected to be restored within two weeks. Although the water level is subsiding in Belize City, several roads are still only passable by 4x4 trucks and some bridges are still under water. Since they have been submerged for 24 hours in some instances, embankments could have been eroded.

In San Pedro over 50 houses have collapsed and unconfirmed reports indicate that only five houses were left standing on Cay Caulker. In Corosal, 28 villages have been affected by floods, city schools are being used as temporary shelters and at least 600 persons are accommodated there. Around fifteen thousand persons have returned from shelters to their homes or to relatives' homes.

Numerous poisonous snakes (fer de lance, coral and rattlers) are to be found in the Orange Walk and Cayo District, posing a threat to local residents. Public health services have issued a warning for persons to stay indoors in order to reduce the possibility of snake bites.

Reports from OCHA confirm that, given the lack of communications, it is difficult to determine the number of people affected and the main emergency requirements. The UN Emergency Disaster Management Team continues its co-ordination meetings in close contact with NEMO and the donor

community in Belize. NEMO's Foreign Assistance Committee has been informed of the assistance that can be offered by the UN and its relevant emergency response agencies.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Santo Domingo and Guatemala Regional Delegations are working closely with the Belize Red Cross Society. A team of four disaster and relief delegates have arrived in Belize by road, crossing the Mexican border at Chetumal. In addition, the Guatemala Regional Disaster Preparedness delegate has reached Belize and is currently assisting the National Society in the co-ordination of further relief activities as well as participating in meetings with the NEMO.

The American Red Cross International Disaster Response Unit (IDRU), composed of four delegates is scheduled to arrive in Belize shortly. The IDRU will provide relief supplies and a satellite telephone. A total of USD 25,000 has been released from the American Red Cross Emergency and Relief Fund to support relief operations implemented by the Belize Red Cross. In addition, CHF 120,000 has been released from the Federation's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) to support the Belize Red Cross Society's ongoing relief activities.

The Belize Red Cross Society (BRCS)

In the Belize City area, the National Society is providing medical care to persons suffering from diarrhoea, high blood pressure and flu, distributing relief supplies in shelters as well as providing first aid assistance to those most in need. A BRCS relief boat was sent out to the cays to start distributing food and relief supplies and to conduct needs and damage assessments. The Society has reviewed its stocks of food and reports a need for additional food supplies to complete the distributions to shelters.

The Belmopan branch is distributing food to families living outside the shelters who have lost all their belongings and food supplies, as well as to approximately 120 people living in shelters. It is also providing medical care to persons severely affected by the hurricane.

The Corosal branch has mobilised 25 volunteers and staff to conduct preliminary needs and damage assessments in the surrounding areas. However, transportation poses problems since roads remain flooded.

Needs

Immediate needs are for plastic sheeting, emergency food supplies, water and sanitation products as well as medical supplies (snake antidote included), blankets, kitchen utensils and cots (or mattresses).

It is expected that the government will request the Belize Red Cross to continue working in the areas of primary health care and relief distributions, and may be asked to take on some responsibility in the rehabilitation stage, during which it is anticipated that the greatest needs will be for seeds and construction materials in the farming communities.

A preliminary appeal will be launched shortly.

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