

CENTRAL AMERICA: HURRICANE MITCH

16 November
1998

appeal no. 33/98

situation report no. 03

period covered: 10 to 15 November 1998

The number of people affected by Hurricane Mitch is now put at 3.7 million. The National Societies of Central America, which have been involved in rescue and emergency relief efforts from the start, are steadily expanding their relief services, which are focusing on shelter, food distributions and supplying clean water. They are receiving increasing support in the form of supplies, personnel and transport from participating Societies through the Federation co-ordinated operation.

The context

The number of dead continues to rise. The latest figures are: dead, 10,502; missing, 8,854; evacuated, 1,331,341; affected, more than 3,771,000.

Although roads and bridges are slowly being repaired in the countries most severely affected, food and water are being airlifted to the thousands of victims still trapped by floodwaters in small villages in remote areas of the crippled countries, helping them survive until they can be evacuated.

Vehicles being used to distribute relief goods are beginning to break down after untold hours of use in the terrible conditions of dirt roads and river beds. Vehicles owned by volunteers have been made available to the National Red Cross Societies. Helicopters on loan from neighbouring countries continue their daily task of rescuing victims of the floods, but livestock and other small animals cannot be saved. Instructions are given through the media on how to bury or incinerate dead animals.

The UN World Food Programme is distributing 11,000 tons of food, from in-country stocks, to 682,000 victims in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador and is seeking to build up its food pipeline. Food needs over the next six months or more will be a critical issue before any local harvest can be expected.

There are some 11,000 RC volunteers mobilised in the four most affected countries of Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. They are supported by Federation and PNS delegates and the appeal but a revised assessment is now getting underway and attention is beginning to focus on the rehabilitation phase with a Federation mission planned to depart for the region this week.

Latest events

The destruction caused by this natural disaster, is now producing a social tragedy; many employers, including large companies, such as Standard Fruit Company, are closing down, either temporarily or

permanently Over 18,000 workers are estimated to have lost their jobs with the disappearance of the banana industry overnight in Honduras alone. Damage to infrastructure in Honduras is estimated at \$ two billion; as much as 70% of agricultural production has been destroyed.

In Nicaragua, FAO estimates that 50% of total agricultural production has been lost. Damage to infrastructure is estimated at \$ one billion including 2,500 kms of highway damaged or destroyed. 500 shelters remain open and there are 614,000 evacuees.

Several small businesses that depend on tourism and self-employed service workers no longer have customers. This year, migrant workers will find themselves in worse conditions than before, because it is expected that it will be approximately one year before the next harvest is ready, provided the waters recede soon from the fields. Basic foods are suffering a 30% increase in price. Fishermen are currently using their boats to take people across rivers where bridges were washed out, because there are no fish after a hurricane. Bananas, the bread of the poor, will be in great demand shortly, since the crop was destroyed. Export crops such as coffee, sugar, tropical fruits and tobacco were practically wiped out.

Those whose house is still standing are being asked to leave the shelters. Many more who have nothing left will have to be relocated to higher ground. The weather has turned cold for this time of the year and there are predictions of temperatures dropping even more.

Governments that were in debt before must now borrow even more to replace the destroyed infrastructure: roads, bridges, water systems, electric lines and schools. The five presidents of the republics of Central America in a recent meeting asked for their foreign debt to be written off. France and Cuba on Wednesday agreed to write off the foreign debt for Nicaragua. They have also called for an amnesty for undocumented migrants from the region; for a US commitment to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement with Central America; and the European Union to eliminate tariffs and import duties.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

HONDURAS

The Honduran Red Cross has already distributed more than 6,000 family parcels, containing rice, beans, corn, sugar, soap and toothpaste. Some 3,000 Red Cross volunteers continue to assist in the relief effort.

In the north, Red Cross branches are buying food for family packages. They are starting to plan for the next three months, when they fear government aid will begin to dwindle. In the capital, Tegucigalpa, the Society is carrying out a joint medical effort with volunteers from the National Societies of Mexico and El Salvador. Costa Rica has sent 18 volunteers to San Pedro Sula with radio communication equipment, medical supplies and water via an airplane on loan from the DHL company. Two DC-130 planes of Costa Rica with food and other items aboard are scheduled to arrive shortly. Five medical doctors, who are volunteers from the Costa Rica Red Cross, will leave tomorrow for Puerto Cortés, a port north of the capital, to set up a small field hospital. The Society will also be sending by ship one ambulance and two satellite telephones.

Distribution got underway last week of the first British Red Cross flight which brought in a range of relief items in response to the Appeal including six WHO Emergency Health kits, one million water purification tablets, 30 x 5,000-litre bladder tanks, 10,000 x 20-litre Jerry Cans and 5 mt calcium hypochlorite. A second British Red Cross relief flight arrived this weekend with a further three million water purification tablets, six tons of emergency food, 3,000 blankets and a range of water containers and bladder tanks.

The Honduran Red Cross has just hired a press and information person to handle media relations. It has a good telecommunications system in place and the Spanish Red Cross are currently working to install HF coverage countrywide. Three Rubb Halls are expected to arrive soon to augment the HRC's existing two warehouses which have a combined capacity of 1,600 cubic metres.

The existing modest transport capacity of the HRC HQ is being augmented with the addition of four pick-up vehicles and a 12 ton truck being provided by Spanish Red Cross. German Red Cross is shipping seven trucks and an ambulance to the National Society.

An initial assessment of the in-country situation regarding airports, sea ports and road transport has been carried out by a British Red Cross/Federation logistician.

A new system of distribution has been set up which will ensure the repackaging of all donations received into family packages, duly marked as Red Cross donations, and distributed in an orderly fashion to the most vulnerable. All donations arriving at San Pedro Sula airport are being transported by land to the National Headquarters central warehouse.

Spanish Red Cross is supporting relief operations in the northern zone and in the central border area with Nicaragua. German Red Cross is supporting food distributions in the Santa Barbara. ERU Water Purification Units are being deployed with support from the Swedish and Austrian RCs.

NICARAGUA

The Nicaraguan Red Cross has distributed to date 111 metric tons of food and 49 metric tons of clothes.

The National Society is now centering most of its efforts on Chinandega, a small city on the Pacific coast, close to the border with El Salvador. The Spanish Red Cross has a team of five delegates that, together with the Nicaraguan Red Cross volunteers, have set up regional warehouses and initiated the purchasing process.

A Mexican Red Cross Youth Committee volunteer is helping the Nicaraguan Red Cross set up a DWI (Disasters Welfare Inquiries) system and requests for tracing family members can now be accepted. Staff member of the American Red Cross and the French Red Cross are currently working with the Society to assess assistance needs in the reconstruction phase.

The Canadian Red Cross has provided the Federation with a relief co-ordinator for the operation. An ERU for water purification is being supplied by the German and Peruvian RCs.

GUATEMALA

The Guatemalan Red Cross has established six health brigades of eight volunteers each who visit shelters to review kitchens, water supplies, sleeping quarters and general hygiene, including the separation of cases of contagious diseases. The Red Cross is currently assisting 8,000 people in 23 shelters.

Rescue operations are over, except in Cobán and Puerto Barrios, where there are still villages cut off by flooding.

The Guatemalan Red Cross has one 3 ½ ton truck, 2 pick-ups and 2 VW ambulances which are currently being used to transport food packages to outlying areas of the city. A total of 2,210 volunteers are coordinating with Boy Scouts, volunteer catholic church groups and other youth volunteer organizations for the packaging of food parcels.

There is good coordination with the municipalities, particularly concerning shelters, with CONRED (Comisión Nacional de Reducción de Desastres), the Fire Department, the Municipal Police Department, who have put their vehicles at the disposal of the Red Cross, and with the Army.

The Spanish Red Cross has a 5 member delegation working with the Guatemala Red Cross and as of today, a DWI (Disaster Welfare Inquiries) volunteer from the Mexican Red Cross Youth Committee is assisting with setting up the tracing system.

EL SALVADOR

The El Salvador Red Cross is distributing relief supplies – food, water, clothing, milk, baby bottles, maize, cookies, bananas, beans, kitchen supplies and flash lights – taken from their disaster warehouse or donated by the public. They have distributed 109,570 lbs. of food, 19,672 lbs. of clothing and 2,470 sets of kitchen utensils. A total of 22,726 people have received small family food parcels. Free medical attention has been organised: the most prevalent health problem is mycosis (skin fungus).

At present the Society has 2,700 Red Cross volunteers, 1,000 non-Red Cross volunteers, and 146 paid personnel working in its relief operation.

The National Society keeps in close contact with other relief organizations by attending meetings of the SISNAE (National Emergency System). A representative of the ANEP (National Association of Private Enterprises) has been named by the President of El Salvador as the official coordinator of relief assistance.

The El Salvador Red Cross currently has 14 volunteers working on the Honduran side of the border, replacing 12 other volunteers that had been there from the day the hurricane struck until this past weekend.

The Spanish Red Cross has donated 600,000 USD as well as two 4x4 vehicles and radio communications equipment. It has also sent two delegates to help coordinate the relief effort.

The International Federation for its part, has transferred \$50,000 USD and the Panamanian Red Cross has sent a reporting delegate on 13 November.

COSTA RICA

There was relatively little damage in Costa Rica with four deaths and seven people reported missing. Once the rescue and relief needs in the country were met, the Costa Rican Red Cross proceeded to assist other badly hit Central American countries. It is sending volunteers – search and rescue brigades and medical personnel -- with supplies, radio communications equipment and vehicles to Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The Costa Rican Red Cross has put on stand-by additional teams of volunteers ready to replace Red Cross personnel from other countries if requested.

BELIZE

The Belize Red Cross Society assigned volunteers to shelters which received many of the 75,000 evacuees from the coastal areas. It moved its vehicles to protected areas inland for safekeeping and maintained constant communication with all its branches, expecting a category 5 hurricane. Finally, Belize escaped with only coastal flooding as a result of heavy rains in the mountains of Honduras and Guatemala. The National Society is now actively assisting its closest neighbours with almost daily shipments of food, water and medicines, made possible thanks to commercial airlines who are offering free transportation of humanitarian aid, on a space available basis, and to the use of charter flights from other NGOs.

Technical Assistance

A total of 21 Federation delegates, 43 delegates from PNS and 127 volunteers from other National Societies are now in the field. (See Annex 2). The ONS are currently assessing the next steps to be taken in light of the assistance that is arriving from other NS and formulating plans of action to

coordinate the best use of the relief goods that are arriving. The Regional Delegation in Guatemala City is in permanent communication with all field delegations.

In addition to the close support being offered to the ONS in the field, the Federation is playing a strong co-ordinating role in channeling the needs and co-ordinating relief deliveries to the NS. Plans are in place with the British Red Cross for relief flights to meet the immediate outstanding needs in the health sector, including vector control, in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. A total of 31 WHO Basic Health Kits and eight cholera kits are among the emergency supplies. Two flights have already taken place and a third is foreseen for the coming week. It is also planned to send 4,000 Austrian Red Cross hygiene kits to Nicaragua.

The Regional Delegation and the Federation's coordinator with the Guatemalan Red Cross have maintained close contact with the Regional Delegation of the ICRC in Guatemala. The ICRC has reinforced its delegation with a tracing delegate who, together with the three DWI (Disaster Welfare Inquiries) Youth Committee members of the Mexican Red Cross, will work under the coordination of the Federation Regional Delegation.

Outstanding Needs

The National Societies of the affected countries are continuing to receive small quantities of national donations from the general public which are promptly being distributed. Nevertheless, greater quantities of food are required such as maize, maize flour, beans, rice, sugar, oatmeal, cooking oil, salt and canned fish (tuna/sardines) and/or canned corned beef. It is expected that foodstuffs will be needed for the next 6 to 12 months, and the quantities required will be enormous.

In a recent visit to the National Societies of the affected countries the President of the Spanish RC stated that the large contribution from the Spanish people and institutions (CHF 58 million by November 12) was planned to be spent in consultation with the NS of these countries and the Federation Secretariat, and in coordination with the other PNS, for the rehabilitation and development of the communities affected and the strengthening of the local Red Cross in each affected country. The Spanish Red Cross has plans in place for the procurement of some 3,000 tons of foodstuffs for distribution throughout the four countries over a six months period. It is also providing substantial financial support to the ONS for local procurement.

Other NS such as the Canadian Red Cross and the British Red Cross have reported successful public fund-raising campaigns to the Federation and these are on-going. American Red Cross is also mobilising significant resources including food, 20 tons of chlorine and two trucks.

The Federation is co-ordinating the establishment of water purification Emergency Response Units in Honduras and Nicaragua in co-operation with the Swedish, Austrian, German and Peruvian Red Cross Societies. These ERUs will relieve in great measure the water situation for some large groups of homeless but there are still many smaller rural areas that require water. Clean water, water containers, water purification tablets and chlorine are very much in demand.

The region is responding well to the health situation and there have been no reported large-scale outbreaks of disease related to the disaster. Nevertheless, there are possible risks of dengue, malaria, cholera and other diseases transmitted by water because of the huge flooded areas. It is being recommended to all NS in the region to take the following measures: health education, sanitation, water supply and vector control (killing insects and rats that may carry diseases). Medicines and medical supplies are still required as it is expected that the Red Cross will be working in the affected zones for some time to come. Some ONS suffered considerable damage to their installations, including total or partial loss of their blood banks. It will require extensive assistance to replace and in some cases, improve their blood bank capacities.

Basic kitchen supplies, including can openers, if canned goods are to be distributed, and household items will be required, including pails, brooms, mops, detergents and soap. An additional request that is increasingly being made, is for tools; construction tools (saws, hammers, shovels) and agricultural tools (hoes, machetes, shovels).

The Federation is strengthening the co-ordination mechanism in the field and the support to the ONS. A further assessment of needs in the emergency phase is getting underway and a team will depart soon for an early examination with the Regional Delegation and ONS of possible Red Cross involvement in the rehabilitation phase.

External Relations - Media/Government & Other NGO's

Red Cross representatives have been participating in coordination meetings with government officials and representatives of other NGOs such as CARITAS, Rotary International, Habitat for Humanity, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, PAHO/WHO, etc. The International Federation has also participated in Inter-Agency meetings hosted by OCHA and briefed the international community on Red Cross activities.

The two information delegates assigned to the operation -- an information officer from Geneva and the regional information delegate -- have kept the national and international media well informed and have helped the ONS publicise their relief activities.

In Guatemala, in cooperation with OFDA (Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance) of the United States government, the information delegate from Geneva went on a 5 hour reconnaissance flight by helicopter to the affected areas on the Atlantic coast and eastern part of Guatemala, not far from the borders with Honduras and El Salvador. A video tape, which is on its way to Geneva, was produced. The footage will be distributed to the media and NS on request.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The Federation has received many generous pledges of support in response to its appeal, but now urgently needs these pledges to be converted into cash to enable it to move ahead with funding emergency relief efforts in the affected countries.

The rapid full funding of the appeal will allow the swift and effective completion of the relief phase and enable planning of the funding and implementation of the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase to get under way.

To ensure the most effective use of resources, the Federation emphasizes the importance of coordination among the actors in this relief operation, given the magnitude of the disaster and complexity and the length of time it will take for these countries to recover.

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