

# ***CENTRAL AMERICA: HURRICANE MITCH***

26 November  
1998

*appeal no. 33/98*

*situation report no. 5*

*period covered:* 19 to 25 November 1998

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***The relief phase continues with increased effectiveness as all four affected countries are now fully staffed with Federation delegates. There is good coordination with all Participating National Societies (PNS's) and the team members from the Geneva Assessment and Planning Mission (working out of the Regional Delegation). Planning for the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase is now well underway.***

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## ***The context***

Hurricane Mitch, together with Tropical Storm Newton, devastated Central America from 27 October to 1 November, leaving behind a wake of massive destruction. The arduous task faced by the Operating National Society (ONS) is now to feed, shelter, and attend to the medical needs of hundreds of thousands of the victims. While the number of deaths has stabilised at 10,562, the total cost of the damage is still being assessed. More important than the material losses are the long-term effects of the disaster, such as the number of children that will lose a year of schooling because of the destruction of classrooms (schools are still being used as shelters); post traumatic stress in the victims and rescuers; and the massive unemployment from the destruction of sources of income.

## ***Latest events***

Most of the severely affected countries are considering prolonging the state of the emergency period, and the curfew remains in effect in Tegucigalpa. Victims that have left the shelters to return to their houses are struggling to remove mud from what is left of their homes, and to resume their normal life -- often without a roof over their heads. In many instances, cardboard and plastic bags are used as temporary roofing, and the rain that continues to fall has turned the caked-up dirt back to mud again.

According to the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), controlling communicable diseases in the countries devastated by Hurricane Mitch will require significant investment, primarily to control disease-carrying mosquitoes and to ensure that water and food are not contaminated. While catastrophic outbreaks are not expected at this point, strict monitoring has been undertaken to detect any potential occurrences of cholera, schistosomiasis, dengue, malaria, and other diseases.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent action***

A co-ordination meeting with Participating National Societies (PNS) representatives and other possible donors and interested societies was held on 16 November at the Federation Secretariat in Geneva. The

objective was to share information related to Hurricane Mitch operations, as well as to coordinate the planning and response process in support of the ONS's.

On 20 November, a co-ordination meeting was also held at the Guatemala City Regional Delegation. All of the Federation's field delegates were present, as well as members of the Geneva Assessment and Planning Mission.

A further information and co-ordination meeting was held on 23 November with the participation of the presidents of the Red Cross Societies of the four most affected countries, the Director for the Americas Department, the Regional Delegation team, and the Secretariat Assessment and Planning Mission (composed of experts in disaster policy, relief operation engineering, health in disaster situations, and the transition from relief to development). There was agreement that the four Geneva-based experts should immediately visit the region to launch an effective funding and project proposal.

Money transfers have been made to the ONS, and purchases of the items specified in their plans of action are currently taking place. It is expected that within a week the distribution of the newly acquired items will be carried out. The Spanish Red Cross (SRCS) has offered the services of their purchasing centre in Panama for regional purchases of those food items for which the prices are considered more competitive. The SRCS has also offered to pay for these purchases from its own resources, as well as purchases made at country level by the Federation Secretariat and the ONS. The German Red Cross (GRCS) is purchasing food in Mexico, and their 32 truck convoy is proceeding on schedule to deliver cargo in all four countries. The British Red Cross (BRCS) has arranged an airlift consisting of three cargo airplanes. The Office of Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) offered the Italian Red Cross (IRCS) an opportunity to airlift approximately 150 pallets of soap, tents, blankets and new clothing to Honduras and Nicaragua.

## **HONDURAS**

The emergency situation is now over in some areas, but problems persist in others. Two areas in particular, La Mosquitia and La Ceiba, are isolated and have very dispersed population, the first in a dense forest and the second in marsh lands on the Pacific Coast.

The Federation's relief operation team is being strengthened this week with a Logistics delegate. The plan of action calls for providing 12,000 families with basic items such as food, blankets, kitchen utensils, drinking water, hygiene kits, chlorine, and medicines.

The Austrian Emergency Response Unit (ERU) Specialised Water team has set up their equipment in the Izotoka Nueve River, 3 kilometres Northeast of Choluteca City. Located in proximity is the Swedish ERU Mass Water team. Both teams are receiving very good support from local authorities, who are providing workers, translators, and night watchmen. There are a total of 30,000 displaced located in relatively small camps (most sheltered in schools), and another approximately 20,000 located in the countryside. The water equipment is 30% operational, supplying most of the 60,000 litres per day of high quality water needed for Choluteca's hospital.

The American Red Cross (ARC) has just sent a field delegate, and have agreed to purchase whatever relief supplies are required that have not been covered by other ONS. The German Red Cross has also recently sent a field delegate, and are awaiting the delivery of the food purchased in Mexico that is enroute via the 32 truck convoy. The Spanish RC operation has begun operations in the northern part of the country, and the French Red Cross, through its branch in Guadeloupe, has sent 2 containers with basic medical supplies and canned food.

Tracing systems have been set up in the capital city, Tegucigalpa, as well as San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba. There have been 778 Disaster Welfare Inquiries; 325 have been resolved, 342 cases remains open, with 111 pending.

Two members of the Geneva Assessment Mission are currently in Tegucigalpa, collecting data and interviewing the President of the National Society (NS) and Federation delegates to obtain data for the rehabilitation and reconstruction appeal.

Of the volunteers from other NS that were assisting the Honduran Red Cross (HRCS), three volunteers from the Mexican Red Cross are working in relief, and are expecting the arrival of 2 psychologists.

The Costa Rican Red Cross (CRRCS) has provided a total of 28 volunteers to assist in neighbouring Honduras.

### *Health*

As of 21 November, PAHO and the Honduran Ministry of Health reports 3 confirmed cases of cholera and 11 under observation; leptospirosis is suspected to exist in three provinces (San Pedro Sula, Choloma and Lima), with 4 confirmed cases and 3 deaths; there have been 1,080 cases of dengue, 33 of which were suspected of being haemorrhagic dengue. At this date, only 15 cases are confirmed, with 4 deaths.

## **NICARAGUA**

Tracing service training has been provided by one ICRC Delegate and a Mexican Red Cross Volunteer. The Regional Delegation is recruiting a replacement Tracing Delegate. The mission of the Information Delegate from Geneva was successfully completed, having produced several articles for Federation publications as well as for the web page.

Coordination meetings are taking place with UNICEF to set up a psycho-social program for traumatised children. The basic plan calls for the NS to lend its installations and youth volunteers as activities coordinator for this program during holidays and weekends. The NS is being asked to coordinate training facilities and activities of the UNICEF volunteers who will carry out trauma counselling over a proposed three year duration.

The NS has distributed 1,500 tons of supplies, and will be working with 40 additional communities during the coming week. A total of 438,000 people have received assistance from the 15 Red Cross branches.

### *Health*

PAHO has had 335 cholera cases reported (156 in Managua, 46 in Carazo, 25 in Masaya, 18 in Matagalpa, 16 in Chinandega and 13 in Estelí) with the rest scattered in six other areas. There are 265 possible cases of leptospiros, a disease which is transmitted by contact with water contaminated by rodent urine or faeces. Of the possible cases, 42 have been confirmed by laboratory test, including 30 in Chinandega, 11 in Estelí, and one in Madriz. Seven people have died from the disease.

## **GUATEMALA**

The NS estimates that some 35,000 beneficiaries have been assisted this week in the provinces of Izabal, Alta Veraz, Escuintla, Jutiapa, Santa Rosa, Zacapa, Peten, Guatemala, Suchitepequez, El Quiche and Jutiapa.

The Guatemalan Red Cross has received assistance from sister NS from the countries of Ecuador, Mexico, United States, Spain, Netherlands, Argentina and Italy.

The Netherlands Red Cross is planning to assist the Guatemalan Red Cross on sustained development projects for a proposed period of 3 years.

### *Health*

The NS is increasing its medical assistance in the affected areas, particularly in the provinces of Escuintla, Guatemala, and Izabal. Currently, there are 9 doctors and 6 nurses, assisted by volunteers,

who are providing medical attention to 1,170 families in 19 villages of Iztapa, Escuintla Province. In this province an assessment team detected that up to 90% of the population was suffering from upper respiratory and gastrointestinal problems, and skin infections.

The Epidemiology Department of the Guatemala Ministry of Public Health reports 20 new cases of cholera since 4 November, bringing the total to 261 notified cases, 234 confirmed, and 17 deaths. Because of the fear that this problem might increase, active monitoring is underway.

### **EL SALVADOR**

The Spanish Red Cross plans to begin distributing supplies for 2,500 families in the eastern region of the country. There are now two Federation delegates in place ready to implement the action plan and to procure supplies as funds generated by the appeal are now available.

#### *Health*

As of 20 November, the Ministry of Health has reported 6 cases of cholera, with one death. The most recent known outbreak of cholera occurred on 19 November in a government hospital which was traced to contaminated food sold by a street vendor near the border of Guatemala.

## ***Outstanding needs***

The outstanding needs for the four most affected countries remain the same. Additionally, the Guatemala Ministry of Health is urgently requesting, through the Guatemalan Red Cross, the items mentioned in the previous situation report No. 4. Please refer as well to Report No. 4 for items needed for the campaign to eliminate vectors during this emergency phase (eg, the first 100 days after the disaster). Likewise, the Regional Delegation checked the situation in the other three countries and confirmed that the same items are required – double quantities for Honduras and Nicaragua and the same amount for El Salvador.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

Meetings are being held at the local level with UNICEF and other NGO's for coordination purposes.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details.

## ***Conclusion***

The Red Cross/Red Crescent response to the devastating consequences of Hurricane Mitch is far from concluded. As the immediate rescue and evacuation efforts undertaken by Red Cross volunteers throughout the region decreases, a wider relief and rehabilitation program is being carefully planned. This will largely be an effort to bridge the gap between the relief and reconstruction phases.

Participating National Societies (PNS) and other donors are thanked for the technical and financial support they have contributed, and are urged to continue responding to the outstanding needs.

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