

CENTRAL AMERICA : HURRICANE MITCH

*Geneva,
28 December 1998*

Appeal no. 33/98

Situation Report no. 7

Period covered: 15 December - 21 December 1998

During the week referred to by this report, relief food distributions have been carried out in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Efforts to secure health continue; the provision of potable water and medical services are being complemented by the distribution of information material. So far, no major epidemics have been reported in any of the countries, but isolated cases of cholera, leptospirosis and dengue have led to some fatalities.

The need to shift the focus from relief to rehabilitation is being emphasised by beneficiaries, humanitarian organisations and donors alike. Several Participating National Societies (PNSs) are also starting to redirect their efforts towards rehabilitation. **On 23 December the Federation issued a transitional appeal (2/99), bridging the emergency and rehabilitation phases of the operation, and is preparing a rehabilitation appeal which will be launched early in 1999. The operation financed by appeal 33/98 will close on 31 December. This is therefore the last situation report on this appeal: a final report will be issued in the first quarter of 1999.**

The context

Hurricane Mitch, which hit the countries of Central America between 22 October and 1 November, was the region's worst disaster for at least a century. The latest official statistics put the total number of deaths at 9,745, with 1,736,285 people extremely affected, out of 6,5 people hit by the disaster, and 93,690 dwellings either totally destroyed or badly damaged. At least 2,5 million are left temporarily dependent on aid.

The UN is planning to channel nearly USD 153 million to immediate relief and rehabilitation in the four affected countries . The hurricane destroyed bridges, roads and water supplies and ruined most of the harvest. It is estimated that the economic development of the region has been set back at least 20 years.

The Federation launched appeal 33/98 on 4 November, seeking CHF 12,570,000 to assist 180,000 beneficiaries for three months. This appeal will be closed on 31 December. It will be replaced by transitional appeal 2/99, covering the period 1 January - 30 June 1999 and increasing the beneficiary numbers to 264,360.

To-date, CHF 5.7 million have been transferred to the region by the Federation. This has been supplemented by generous donations made to various Participating National Societies with a presence in the region.

More than 40 Red Cross delegates (14 from the Federation) are currently working in the region, and a special regional Mitch team has been set up in the Regional Delegation based in Guatemala.

Latest events

The emergency phase is over and relief efforts are now being seen as the first step towards sustainable rehabilitation. The premise of transitional appeal 2/99 is that all Red Cross assistance for Mitch victims should leave beneficiaries stronger and facilitate their return to normal life.

Several of the PNS delegations established in the affected countries have designed rehabilitation projects in co-ordination with the Operating National Societies. The Federation has been consulting the National Societies in Central America as well as potential donors in order to design a realistic and comprehensible framework for reconstruction, underlining the Federation role as architect of co-operation.

The first round of food distributions is nearly finished in all countries. Thanks to good co-ordination among the ONSs, the PNSs and the Federation, the Red Cross is maintaining an approach of standardising the type and amount of aid given to the beneficiaries throughout Central America.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

In all four countries, the Operating National Society is the main co-ordinator of relief and rehabilitation activities. All distributions are carried out through the networks of Red Cross volunteers already existing in this disaster prone region. In areas where no local Red Cross branch exists the Federation is assisting the National Societies with assessing needs and setting up the necessary structures.

Thus, in this report, terms such as "Federation distribution" or "Spanish Red Cross distribution" are used only to indicate funding and the delegation that is contributing to the efforts carried out by volunteers and professionals of the Operating National Societies.

Honduras

Distributions: The Federation continues to co-ordinate food distributions with the American Red Cross which is providing all supplies. The aim is to reach 13,500 families in the departments of Choluteca, Valle Oeste, Olancho, el Paraiso and Franco Morazán.

During the week covered by this report, 1,017 families in El Paraiso have received a 50 kg parcel containing rice, beans, corn flour, sugar, butter and salt. This has been supplemented by the distribution of three blankets, a Belgian funded kitchen set and one hygiene kit per family. Another distribution was undertaken for 180 families in Juticalpa and for 30 families on the banks of the Patuca river.

The Spanish Red Cross has finalised its first distribution of similar food parcels and other items for 13,500 families in the departments of Cortés, Yoro, Atlántida and Colon. A second distribution is planned to start at the end of December.

The German Red Cross has made a distribution of food and non-food items to 5,000 families and is planning a second round.

Health & Water: Swedish and Austrian Emergency Response Units (ERUs) continue to provide clean water for thousands of families in five Departments. These units have been set up within the Federation ERU framework and are playing a crucial role not only in meeting an essential need, but also in avoiding the emergence of typical water-borne diseases such as cholera. The Spanish Red Cross is operating a number of smaller water purification plants.

The Federation is preparing for the distribution of 10 water chlorification tablets per family in the areas of operation. This will be done in co-operation with the Ministry of Health and the local Health Promoters in each community.

While isolated cases of cholera and dengue have been detected, no epidemics have so far been reported. Main health problems are constituted by respiratory infections and skin diseases.

Tracing: The Honduran Red Cross have been able to close 709 cases of missing persons reported through the Social Welfare Inquiry system. 471 cases are currently being processed while 356 remain open.

Co-ordination: A workshop was held in order to agree on measures to co-ordinate and systematise relief and rehabilitation efforts between the Honduran Red Cross and the delegations of PNSs and the Federation. This should enhance the flow of information and ensure that existing capacities are used to maximum effect.

Nicaragua

Relief distributions: The first Federation distribution has taken place (23 December) to 1,035 families in the departments of Tipitapa and Leon. Each family received 60 kgs of food including rice, beans, corn, sugar, wheat, salt and cooking oil, plus kitchen utensils and hygiene kits.

During the reporting period the Spanish Red Cross finished its first distribution of food, blankets, jerry cans and kitchen kits for 8,500 families.

Health & water: Cases of leptospirosis, cholera, intestinal diseases and respiratory ailments continue to occur. Within the reporting period, leptospirosis claimed at least one life, while two deaths were attributed to cholera. The Federation is in the process of sending 7 cholera kits to local health authorities in co-operation with the Ministry of Health. These kits include rehydration salts, antibiotics, and other items for treating and preventing the disease. Furthermore, the Federation is distributing leaflets on cholera prevention.

Thanks to Emergency Response Units from the Red Cross Societies of Germany and Peru, 15,000 families in Villanueva, Chinandeca, are being provided with clean drinking water every day.

The Nicaraguan Red Cross has agreed to support government efforts to remove the many mines that were uncovered by the floods and mud slides. While the army will be doing the actual de-mining, Red Cross volunteers and ambulances will be standing by, providing first aid in case of injuries.

Co-ordination: In the reporting period, meetings were held with the World Food Programme in order to co-ordinate food distributions and avoid duplication of efforts. Besides, the Federation delegation has met with UNICEF, and regular sessions are being held with the Red Cross societies of France, Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands.

El Salvador

Distributions: The Federation is finishing its first round of food distributions to 6,000 families in the Western and Central parts of the country. The Spanish Red Cross is concentrating efforts in the East where some 4,000 families are being served. Other items distributed to the same population include kitchen sets.

As the country suffered significantly less damage than both Nicaragua and Honduras, the National Society estimates that the emergency phase is over and that the main Red Cross priority should now be to contribute to co-ordinating rehabilitation efforts in the worst affected areas.

Health: Two health brigades of some 10 persons each are travelling the country, providing medical assistance and promoting preventive measures. Respiratory diseases account for most health problems, followed by gastro-intestinal cases. The teams help distributing water purification tablets as well as kits for treatment of malaria, dengue and cholera.

Co-ordination: A Federation delegate helps co-ordinating Red Cross efforts between the National Society, the Spanish Red Cross delegation and the numerous NGOs that have set up base in El Salvador since Mitch struck.

Guatemala

Relief distributions: Food needs seem to be significantly lesser in Guatemala than in the three other countries covered by this appeal. So far, the Federation has not started any distributions, but the Spanish Red Cross has delivered some 297 metric tonnes to app. 13,500 beneficiaries.

The Federation is assisting the Guatemalan Red Cross with setting up a structure for carrying out the necessary efforts in this area. A national Relief Co-ordinator should be appointed, and training needs to take place at headquarters level as well as in the local Red Cross branches.

Health & Water: Red Cross teams of doctors, nurses and volunteers continue to provide health assistance in Izabal. This includes both preventive measures and medical treatment. The Federation is assisting in organising the teams and has provided pamphlets for distribution among the local population.

Many wells have been contaminated throughout the country. The Federation is assisting the Guatemalan

Red Cross with assessing the damage and proposing repair works which could include digging deeper wells in order to reach unpolluted water. In the shorter term, plans to distribute water purification tablets -- through Red Cross branches as well as the Ministry of Health -- are underway.

Rehabilitation: A rehabilitation programme following the end of the country's civil war was already being carried out before Mitch struck. Supported by a Federation appeal launched in November 1997, it aims at reinforcing existing Red Cross structures and involving local communities in rural areas in development projects. Due to the extent of the hurricane damage it is clear that the programme needs to be extended to include communities which are even more vulnerable now than two months ago.

Co-ordination: The Federation Relief Delegate, supported by the Delegate in charge of the development programme, is maintaining close relations with the National Red Cross Society and with the delegate representing the Spanish Red Cross in Guatemala.

External relations

One of the main tasks of the Federation is to ensure good co-operation among the ONSs, PNSs and the NGOs and UN organisations involved in programmes for the affected populations. The Federation team leader in each country is participating in co-ordination meetings and promoting a constant exchange of information.

The Regional Delegation based in the capital of Guatemala is maintaining close contacts with the regional offices of other organisations in this city.

The Regional Information Delegate is finishing a short video film about the disaster, focusing on the emergency phase. A special Mitch edition of the Federation publication "Insight" is being prepared, and interviews are being given to regional and international media on request.

A regional information workshop will be held in Guatemala in January, one of its objectives being to sustain the momentum gained during the past hectic months.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The aftermath of Mitch still represents one of the greatest challenges to the National Societies in a region already fighting immense poverty and recurring disasters. At the same time, it has given proof of the impressive commitment of their volunteers -- many of them beneficiaries themselves -- who have mobilised to help hundreds of thousands of victims throughout the region.

There is a risk that the National Societies in the region will be overwhelmed by the immense workload of the rehabilitation phase. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind the need to strengthen Red Cross structures while carrying out projects for the most vulnerable. This should lead to a higher level of disaster preparedness and leave the ONSs stronger than before hurricane Mitch. And it should help prevent future disasters having such a devastating impact. Success will depend -- to a large extent -- on the staying power of donors who have already made substantial commitments during this first, emergency, phase.

Donors are invited to contribute to transitional appeal 2/99.

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