

CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO: HURRICANE MITCH

**appeal no: 33/98
30 October. 1998**

***THIS PRELIMINARY APPEAL SEEKS CHF
3,200,000
IN CASH, KIND AND SERVICES
TO ASSIST 90,000 BENEFICIARIES FOR 3 MONTHS***

Summary

Tropical storm Mitch, which has been surging around the Caribbean since last Thursday (22 October), has already caused around 49 deaths and affected an estimated 2.5 million persons region-wide. Despite a lessening of its wind speed on Wednesday 28 October, its erratic movements over the Honduran islands of La Bahía, some 25 miles off the mainland, have caused enormous damage in this already weakened country where an estimated 500,000 persons have been directly affected. The entire Central American coasts and Mexico remain on alert while Mitch's development and final direction continues to be uncertain.

National Red Cross Societies throughout the region are engaged in a wide variety of disaster response activities including issuing warnings, organising evacuations, carrying out damage and needs assessments, feeding the homeless and distributing emergency relief. The International Federation is monitoring the situation, guiding the process of assessing needs and channelling information to potential donors.

The most immediate priority is to respond to the emergency needs of 6,000 homeless families in Honduras. When the emergency phase is over, the Society will prepare a plan of action for rehabilitation activities. In Nicaragua, the Red Cross aims at providing 2,500 families who have lost all their crops with food parcels during the next critical three months. Food parcels are also urgently needed for 3,000 families in Costa Rica and for 1,500 families in Panama. For the time being, National Societies in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize will continue assisting victims in co-ordination with their respective national emergency committees until the situation stabilises.

The Disaster

Tropical storm Mitch, the 13th and strongest storm of the 1998 Atlantic hurricane season, upgraded on 26 October to a Category 5 hurricane, has been causing heavy rains, floods and mud slides along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of all Central American countries and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. Although Mitch was expected to head towards the Mexican Atlantic coasts and Cuba, it remained

stationary over Honduras islands and finally moved over the country's northern coast on Thursday (29 October).

Early reports from **Honduras** indicate that at least 32 persons have died, 72,000 have been evacuated to shelters and 500,000 are suffering the direct consequences of wind-whipped waves, floods, mud slides, electricity cuts, destroyed bridges, roads and the loss of around 75% of agricultural products. It is difficult to estimate the total damage since communications have been cut with many areas. The most critically hit areas are the Islands of La Bahía; on one of them, Guanaja, practically all buildings have been destroyed. Inland, the worst hit areas are the departments of Atlántida, Colón, Yoro, Choluteca, Santa Barbara and Gracia de Dios.

The north of **Nicaragua's** Atlantic region has suffered strong storms caused by Mitch. In the Nicaraguan Pacific departments of Granada, Rivas, Leon and Chinandega two persons are reported dead and at least 1,500 hectares of crops have been ruined after two weeks of flooding due to regular rains, while 5,000 persons in 10 communities were cut off by the overflowing river Malacatoya. Because of Mitch more than 2,500 families in the area have lost crops and infrastructure and will need help for three months until the next harvest. Local flights have been suspended

In **Costa Rica** the National Emergency Commission is maintaining a general alert. Last week three persons died, two were missing and more than 1,000 were evacuated. Strong rains are still expected, especially in the province of Guanacaste (northern Pacific, bordering on Nicaragua) where shelters and relief supplies are being organised to assist evacuees and possible future victims. The estimated number of victims has risen to 3,000; their houses have been badly damaged, and they lack basic health care, and safe water. Communities located in the south of the area have been completely isolated for four days. As there is no access, a relief operation on foot is being planned.

The situation in **Panama** has been worsening since Thursday 22 October when the first effects of strong winds and rains were felt, causing severe flooding in the provinces of Darién, Veraguas, Los Santos and Chiriqui and affecting more than 15,000 people.

In **Belize**, most of the 75,000 residents of coastal Belize city have left, turning the country's largest city into a ghost town. An estimated 60,000 persons are sheltering in temporary refuges where almost no food and relief items are available. Coastal areas of Belize remain on alert because of continuing torrential rains.

The Response so far

Government Action

Governments in all the affected countries have declared emergency alerts and launched contingency plans. All the respective Red Cross Societies are participating in meetings convened by the authorities as part of the national emergency systems. Local emergency committees are also co-ordinating their action with Red Cross chapters.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

In Honduras all Red Cross branches throughout the country have been on alert since 25 October, including the Islas de la Bahía branch which has 1,500 volunteers. They have participated in evacuation, distribution of relief items and assisting evacuees from the communities of Potrerillos, Pimienta, La Lima, Choloma, Villa Nueva, Tela, Santa Rita de Yoro, La Ceiba, Puerto Cortés, Chamelecón, San Pedro Sula and El Progreso. In the departments of Choluca and Santa Barbara five branches have initiated assistance for 200 newly affected persons. Two local branches, La Ceiba and Tocoa, have had to evacuate their building and have lost supplies. The Honduran Red Cross is co-ordinating its action with the local authorities and the Permanent Contingency Commission, and supplying them with vehicles and health assistance. It has established a national information centre in the city of Tegucigalpa, is in permanent contact with the affected areas and has launched an information campaign in the local media.

The Nicaraguan Red Cross has been monitoring the situation along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. An assessment of needs identified food distribution in affected areas as the most urgent priority need.

The 18 local branches of the Costa Rica Red Cross in the region of Guanacaste have been participating in all evacuation and rescue activities in co-ordination with the local Emergency Committees. More than 350 Red Cross volunteers are still working in the area and thanks to the response received to a national appeal will shortly start distributing relief goods. The immediate needs are for food, water and hygienic kits, and clothes.

The Red Cross in Panama has sent a rescue team to the affected areas in the province of Darién. The local branches in Puerto Armuelles and Veraguas are distributing food, water, clothes and medicines.

The Belize Red Cross is in permanent contact with the National Emergency Management Organisation (NEMO) and has mobilised volunteers to assist in the management of the temporary shelters. The Red Cross clinic in Belmopan is providing first aid and primary health care. However, food and other relief materials are urgently needed to assist evacuees.

Co-ordination w

The Regional Delegation in Guatemala is co-ordinating action with all the affected National Societies and has maintained contact with other organisations and potential donors such as WHO/OPS, OFDA, Médecins sans Frontières (Médicos sin Fronteras), ECHO's regional office in Guatemala, and the Spanish, American and Canadian Red Cross Societies.

The Intended Operation

Assessment of Needs •

The **Honduran** Red Cross priorities be providing food, blankets, chlorine, kitchen tools and materials for the reconstruction of homes for 6,000 families in the Atlantic coast. The operation is expected to last two months. The Society's National Relief Department will be in charge and local branches in San Pedro Sula, La Lima, Puerto Cortés, Choloma, Potrerillos, Pimienta, Omoa, El Progreso and Islas de la Bahía will participate.

In **Nicaragua** the Red Cross plans to distribute food parcels, soap and blankets to 2,500 families in the departments of Chinandega and Granada. The relief parcels will cover three months until new crops are harvested.

In **Panama** the Red Cross plans to provide 1,500 families with food parcels during a two-week operation.

In **Costa Rica** the National Society will supply food, hygiene kits and water to 3,000 families.

In **Belize** the RC is still evaluating needs. However it anticipates that food, medicines, clothes and blankets will be needed to assist around 5,000 families in shelters.

Anticipated Later Needs •

The Honduran Red Cross foresees a need for help in the reconstruction of 500 homes. A specific plan of action and budget will be presented later.

Red Cross Objectives •

To act as auxiliaries to the public authorities during the evacuation/emergency phase
to continue first aid and medical support to the shelters
to support feeding programmes to the homeless
to ensure supplies of drinking water
to provide emergency shelter as well as clothing and blankets

to support longer-term rehabilitation needs such as repairs to housing

National Society/Federation Plan of Action

Emergency Phase

The International Federation and its member National Societies will continue to respond to the emergency as indicated above. The Regional Delegation will continue to monitor the development of the disaster and will maintain permanent contact with the NS, assisting in the evaluation of needs and following upon any further requests of assistance.

Two Federation delegates are scheduled to travel soon to Honduras in order to support the NS in ongoing and future activities.

Budget summary

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Mitch is not over yet. It remains a continuing disaster for the people in Central America. This preliminary appeal is being launched to support the relief efforts of National Societies throughout the region. Donors are urged to respond promptly to this Appeal in order to allow the Red Cross to capitalise fully on preparedness measures already in place and to reinforce current relief activities.

CHF 200,000' is being released from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund to assist immediately. No National Societies in the region are able to accept tracing requests at this time or until further notice.

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