

CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO: HURRICANE MITCH

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The Disaster

Tropical storm Mitch, the 13th and fiercest storm of the 1998 Atlantic hurricane season, strengthened on Monday (26 October) into a Category 5 hurricane with sustained winds of 170 mph. Mitch sent heavy rains over the east coast of Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica on Monday as it plodded through the western Caribbean, also affecting Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. So far, eight persons have died and thousands have had to be evacuated.

HONDURAS

Strong winds and rains are still affecting the Atlantic coast of Honduras. Overflowing rivers have caused floods in traditionally vulnerable areas such as La Ceiba, Tela, Puerto Cortés, Progreso, Pimienta, San Manuel and La Lima. Four deaths have been reported in Jutiapa, department of Atlántida. Sporadic rain is also occurring in the capital. The hurricane is now located some 150 km. away from the Honduran coasts, and passing close by the islands of La Bahía which appear to be the most at risk.

NICARAGUA

Strong storms caused by Mitch have swept over the north of the Nicaraguan Atlantic region. Recurrent rains elsewhere have already caused one death and flooded rivers.

In the Nicaraguan Pacific departments of Granada, Rivas, Leon and Chinandega, two weeks of flooding brought on by heavy rains has been reported. The inter-tropical convergence effects caused by Mitch have damaged crops and infrastructure, creating severe problems for more than 2,500 families in the area until the next harvest in three months time.

COSTA RICA

The National Emergency Commission in Costa Rica has declared a red alert, especially along the Pacific coast, because of the strong rains and mud slides brought on by tropical storm Mitch since last Thursday (22 October). In Ciudad Cortés, one of the worst affected locations, the overflow of the Balzar river forced the evacuation of 1,000 persons as well as the entire local hospital. At least three persons died and three more are missing. Schools, bridges and over 70 houses have been damaged.

GUATEMALA

Guatemala's eastern coast is feeling the first effects of the storm. Strong winds and rains have been reported and the government has announced an emergency alert in the departments of Izabal, Alta Verapaz and Petén where the hurricane could cause the most destruction.

MEXICO

As Mitch draws closer to the Yucatan Peninsula, the authorities have undertaken emergency preparedness measures for the general population. In the tourist resort of Cancun they are ready to evacuate an estimated 25,000 tourists.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Red alerts have been announced in all the Central American countries, and in those potentially at risk. National Red Cross Societies, in co-ordination with their respective authorities and emergency committees, are preparing contingency plans, informing the population of the main preventive measures to be taken, and assisting those already evacuated.

COSTA RICA

The Costa Rica Red Cross has been monitoring the situation in the affected areas since last Thursday and assessing locally available resources, should emergency action be needed. Relief co-ordinators have been posted to high risk areas and are organising warehouses for the reception of relief material. Immediate needs are estimated to be food, water, hygienic kits, clothes, temporary shelters and plastic sheets for temporary roofs. However, an in-depth assessment of damage and needs is underway. The Costa Rica Red Cross has enough human resources for the emergency phase and vehicles and boats are also available. Because communication systems in the affected area are inadequate, it is trying to speed up the installation of the radio communication project that forms part of its ongoing Disaster Preparedness programme.

HONDURAS

Red Cross branches throughout the country, including the branch in Islas de la Bahía where the risk is the highest, have been on alert since Sunday. They have helped evacuate communities in Puerto Cortés, Chamelecón, San Pedro Sula y Corozal in El Progreso. The Red Cross is co-ordinating action with the local authorities and assisting them with vehicles and first aid services. The president of the Honduran Red Cross took part in a meeting of the Permanent Contingency Commission to prepare a national relief operation.

The Honduran Red Cross has established a national information centre in the city of Tegucigalpa. It is maintaining permanent contact with high-risk isolated areas such as the Honduran Mosquitia. In the department of Cortis 16 temporary shelters have been opened and are accommodating around 425 evacuated families. A relief team is on its way from the Society's operations centre in San Pedro de Sula with enough blankets, clothes, shoes, plastic sheets, hygienic kits and kitchen tools to meet the most urgent needs of the evacuees. An evaluation of needs is also underway.

An information campaign has been launched through the local media. It includes publication in the local newspapers of the guidelines "Management of Temporary Shelters", produced by the International Federation as part of the DPP Programme, as a tool for all the organisations participating in the relief effort.

NICARAGUA

The Nicaraguan Red Cross is monitoring the situation on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. An in-depth assessment of needs has concluded that food distributions in the affected areas are urgently needed. It has asked the Federation for funds to assist 2.500 families.

GUATEMALA

Red Cross branches in Santo Tomás, El Estor and Guatemala City sent First Aid teams to the threatened area. They took medicines, food and tents in order to set up an emergency camp in anticipation of the hurricane damage.

MEXICO

The Mexican Red Cross is assisting the Government in its efforts to evacuate the population and to provide information to those in areas that could be badly hit, such as the Yucatán Peninsula.

Conclusion

Although the path of hurricane Mitch is unpredictable, all countries along its probable track are on the alert. All the Red Cross Societies in the area are following the situation, liaising with the authorities and assisting them in the implementation of public information campaigns. They are reminding vulnerable communities of what to do to mitigate the effects of the hurricane and are evaluating damage and needs in areas already affected. Should the situation worsen they will be launching local and possibly international appeals in order to assist the affected population.

The Federation may launch an appeal if the hurricane causes further major damage and when more information becomes available.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and
Reporting Department

Santiago Gil
Director
Americas Department