

Anger mounts over relief delays from Hurricane Mitch

Jerry White
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In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch's devastating pounding of Central America thousands more may fall victim of famine and disease because of delays in relief and the lack of resources in the impoverished region.

It is estimated that 18,000 people or more were killed by the severe winds, torrential rain, flooding and mudslides caused by the hurricane before it dissipated over the weekend. Honduras and Nicaragua, the two poorest countries in the hemisphere after Haiti, suffered the greatest death toll and property damage.

The Honduran and Nicaraguan ambassadors to the US said Tuesday that at least 70 percent of the infrastructure in their countries was destroyed. Roads, bridges, telephone lines and almost every other means of communication have been wiped out. Millions are homeless.

Six days after Hurricane Mitch and its remnants dumped 50 inches of rain, authorities say 9,000 people are known to be dead, about 7,000 in Honduras and 2,000 more in Nicaragua. About 13,000 people are still reported missing in the two countries, and authorities acknowledge that many victims swept away by floodwaters or buried in mudslides may never be found.

The Honduran government said roughly 2 million of the nation's 6 million people, most them living in the north and along the Caribbean coast, had either lost their homes or possessions. The storm also wiped out more than two-thirds of the nation's crops and caused property damage exceeding \$2 billion--nearly 60 percent of the country's annual economic output.

The floods have not just damaged December's crop but also new seedlings planted for next year. According to the Care International aid agency, farmers' storerooms were already empty as the storm disaster followed on the heels of one of the worst seasons on record, partly because of the El Nino phenomenon. Many farming families are expected to go into debt to buy new crops; many more will abandon their farms and migrate to the cities already burdened with unemployment and poverty.

In Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital with 800,000 inhabitants, the flooding caused by the overflow of the Choluteca River has resulted in \$250 million in damage. Factories, hospitals, prisons and bridges have been washed

away. In shantytowns surrounding the city, decomposing human bodies and animal remains threaten to cause an outbreak of disease.

On Wednesday long lines in the capital formed outside supermarkets and bakeries to buy what little food and drinkable water remained in stock. In the packed shelters, increasing number of people were falling prey to disease, including hepatitis, conjunctivitis and other diseases associated with contaminated water and overcrowded conditions. Many of the makeshift facilities lack medical supplies, food, clothes and blankets.

'We have nothing in this place, and once a person gets sick it spreads quickly, like what is happening now,' said a resident of one Tegucigalpa shelter, Maria, Palma, 54, whose eyes were red and swollen, apparently from conjunctivitis. 'We badly need help.'

At one of the shelters a lone doctor was working 22 hours a day, the only physician to treat hundreds of victims. 'What we need right now are beds, mattresses, food, clothing. We need all that for the people,' said Emigdino Martinez, an American citizen.

Both inside and outside the capital officials say there is the danger of a cholera outbreak. Because of a lack of equipment, the military and rescue workers are having trouble recovering corpses, and floods have wreaked havoc on sewer systems and have washed out latrines.

In the countryside the lack of equipment, coupled with the flooding of roads, has delayed the rescue of thousands trapped by the rushing waters. There were reports from the northern town of El Progreso of desperate parents tying small children to the limbs of tall trees to protect them from drowning. Hundreds of others were stranded on rooftops or higher ground, without food and water, awaiting rescue. To make matters worse, the government ordered the emptying of hydroelectric dams because of the danger of their bursting. This made the floods even more extensive.

The Honduran military, reporting that the country has only a week's supply of gasoline, said a fuel shortage would further hamper rescue efforts. In addition the country has few helicopters to reach outlying areas cut off by flooding.

With 80 percent of the population living in dire poverty

before the hurricane, government officials are concerned about social unrest, both in cities like Tegucigalpa and in the countryside where landless peasants and agricultural workers have traditionally conflicted with landlords and US companies such as Chiquita Bananas and Dole which monopolize the arable land.

On Monday Honduran President Carlos Flores declared a nighttime curfew and a 'state of exception'--equivalent to a state of siege--which lifts constitutional limits on searches, seizures, arrests and detentions for 15 days. He called on authorities to 'act without thinking twice' in response to looters.

Other government spokesmen said those caught breaking the curfew would be interned in refugee camps that have been set up for those left homeless by the floods.

Residents in Trujillo accused the government of providing aid to affluent families first. 'There's nothing here,' said Luisa Argentina Aguilar, who was left homeless with her two children, mother and sister when the storm blew the roof off her house. 'They're not giving them [food packages] to the poor people,' she said.

In neighboring Nicaragua a crowd of flood victims denounced President Arnoldo Aleman Tuesday for indifference to their plight. In addition to the nearly 2,000 people confirmed dead, 1,817 are missing and almost 420,000 are homeless in the country.

Residents of Leon, 55 miles northwest of Managua, screamed 'murderer' and 'we want food' to Aleman. 'Don't you have children?' one father asked Aleman as he came out of a community meeting, while others screamed: 'the people are dying of hunger.' Uniformed police locked arms to fend off the angry people and whisked the president away.

Leon is near the Casita volcano, where more than 1,800 people were feared buried alive from a giant mudslide that cascaded down the slopes Friday and wiped out four towns.

Aleman and his supporters blamed the confrontation on oppositionists from the Sandinista Front. But his government has angered residents by refusing, on the grounds of his right-wing opposition to the Castro regime, to accept the help of a brigade of Cuban doctors and by declaring that there was a surplus of food in a country where many people have gone for days without eating.

Since coming to power in 1996, Aleman has championed free market policies, dismantling all restrictions on native landowners and businessmen, and benefiting the US banks and corporations. Last year Aleman negotiated a \$1 billion IMF loan and instituted a package of austerity measures which drastically reduced social spending.

Like Honduras, the lack of helicopters and other resources in Nicaragua has exacerbated the disastrous impact of Hurricane Mitch. Because of primitive communication systems both countries were unable to provide sufficient warnings to outlying areas of the coming storm.

Nicaraguan radio reported Tuesday that another 1,000 people

were possibly killed in massive flooding in Wiwili in the rural mountains of northern Nicaragua, 12 miles from the Honduran border. Another 41 communities near volcanoes face 'major risks' of landslides like that of Casitas. Adding to the misery, the Cerro Negro volcano erupted Tuesday covering 90 square miles with ash, and causing another \$20 million in agricultural damage.

Nicaraguan authorities are particularly sensitive to the social and political upheaval that can follow natural disasters. The corruption and callousness of dictator Anastasio Somoza following the devastating 1972 earthquake in Managua that killed 10,000 people was one of the major contributing factors to the 1979 revolution which toppled his US backed regime, ending 40 years of his family's dynasty.

Hurricane Mitch also caused damage throughout other Central American nations and southern Mexico. El Salvador listed 225 dead, 135 missing and 50,000 homeless. Guatemala reported 157 storm-related deaths, 100,000 homes damaged and at least 30 highways blocked. Six people died in Mexico and 31 were missing from a schooner in the Caribbean.

Despite pleas for international aid, the US and other industrialized countries have responded with only token levels of support. President Clinton pledged \$75,000 in immediate material aid to Nicaragua, \$500,000 for the region to be distributed by the Pan-American Health Organization, and freed up \$6 million in Nicaraguan disaster relief previously donated to a special fund organized by the IMF. The European Union offered \$8 million, while France and Britain sent relief specialists and military personnel and equipment.

These amounts contrast sharply to the billions the US in particular has poured into the region to defend its interests and suppress revolution. Between 1981 and 1991 alone Honduras received \$1.7 billion in US economic and financial aid when it was the hub of Washington's proxy war against the radical nationalist Sandinistas in Nicaragua and its counterinsurgency operations against the Farabundo Marti guerrillas in El Salvador.

See Also:

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