

After the storm: Report from Honduras

by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

When I moved with my family to Tegucigalpa two years ago, we assured our friends that compared to the other places we had lived in Central America, the Honduran capital was a tranquil and relatively safe place, exempt by its location from earthquakes, hurricanes and the other natural disasters that plague much of Central America. And then came Hurricane Mitch.

As hurricanes go, Mitch was a sucker punch. Rather than the hit-and-run frenzy of normal Caribbean hurricanes, this storm--the fourth largest of the century--moved just off the Honduran coast and then stalled. For days it pumped rainfall, as much as four inches an hour, over Honduras and northern Nicaragua.

In our mountain neighborhood just outside the capital, we watched helplessly as several neighbors' homes washed away in the storm. The house below ours filled with mud to the eaves. For three days our community was isolated, the road washed away, until finally a neighbor and I waded a river and rode our mountain bikes over mudslides into what remained of Tegucigalpa.

What I witnessed there both depressed me and gave me hope. I was left in tears by scenes along the Choluteca River, where entire neighborhoods were taken by surprise and well over 1,000 people died or disappeared. Many of those who died had just days earlier offered their extra clothes or food for victims of Mitch on the north coast, never imagining that they would soon become victims themselves.

I was given hope by those who led the homeless to shelter, comforted the mourning and fed the hungry. Many of those who rescued others had just watched their own homes flood or be jerked away by the violent currents. For all the stories of terror that the international press has relayed so well in the days after the storm, this disaster also produced thousands of untold stories of heroism and sacrifice.

Like all disasters, Mitch served to magnify existing contradictions of class. Before the rainfall lessened, a wealthy neighbor of mine--a retired army colonel who spent time in prison for drug trafficking--wanted people on our street to form an armed militia to protect us against a poorer neighborhood down the hill. "When food gets scarce, it will be the law of the jungle around here," he proclaimed, "and we need to prepare to defend ourselves."

No one in the neighborhood signed up for his militia, despite his offer to teach us how to shoot straight. Yet his fear is shared by many wealthy people. The government's imposition of a strict curfew and suspension of constitutional rights emerge from a fear that the poor might grow desperate enough to cross the tiny but deep chasm that separates the classes.

The storm also demonstrated the environmental problems caused by injustice. Most of the damage done by Mitch was caused not by the storm's winds, but by its heavy rainfall. As such, it was far from a simple "natural disaster." A major factor contributing to the swollen rivers and flooded towns is the systematic deforestation of the region's mountains. Without the trees, the mountains can no longer act as a sponge to soak up moisture. Yet as long as regional elites monopolize rich farmland and refuse to allow meaningful agrarian reform, peasants will continue to be pushed onto marginal hillsides, practicing a slash-and-burn agriculture that provides the environmental foundation for a disaster like Mitch.

Mitch also blew the shroud off one downside of structural adjustment. After six or seven years of continual reduction and privatization of the state apparatus--measures prescribed by international financial institutions--the government is weaker and more easily overwhelmed by such a massive challenge.

Yet Mitch would have been overwhelming even for a country with a strong central government. The storm was a disaster unparalleled in this hemisphere's modern history. In Honduras alone, 60 percent of the country's infrastructure was twisted or washed away. Seventy percent of the crops were destroyed, including important export crops that provide jobs for Hondurans and hard currency to pay the country's foreign debt. The situation is almost as bad in Nicaragua. Without massive international assistance, both Honduras and Nicaragua face years of famine, epidemic illness and strife.

The immediate response of church agencies in Europe and the U.S. has been encouraging. During the week after the storm, at ecumenical agencies like the Christian Commission for Development (CCD) in Honduras and Nicaragua's Council of Evangelical Churches (CEPAD), the phones never stopped ringing and the e-mail asking how to help piled up. Some agencies, including Church World Service in the U.S., were willing to pay the extra money to fly food and medicines to Tegucigalpa, thus saving the lives of people in isolated villages waiting for assistance to arrive.

Several governments also responded quickly. Mexico hastened to the rescue with 700 tons of food, 11 tons of medicine, 16 helicopters, four rescue planes, 445 rescue personnel, trained search dogs, and a variety of tractors and other heavy equipment. Cuba sent a contingent of physicians who were dispatched to the remote Mosquitia.

Although some U.S. military personnel stationed in Honduras helped in the early days of the crisis by flying courageous helicopter rescue missions, the Clinton administration's initial offer of just \$2 million in assistance was met with shock. Honduran President Carlos Flores damned with faint praise when he thanked the U.S. government for its "moderate" assistance. And the decision of the U.S. to withdraw many embassy families and more than 200 Peace Corps volunteers immediately after the storm was short-sighted, sending the wrong signal about the desire of U.S. citizens to lend a hand.

One woman from a nearby village told me the Peace Corps volunteers there had played a key role in the first couple of days after the storm hit. "Then they got the order to evacuate," she said. "They didn't want to leave. They cried, we cried, even the priest cried when they left us."

Either shamed or simply finally made aware of the magnitude of the disaster, the U.S. government eventually upped its ante to \$70 million for the region, and designated former Presidents Jimmy Carter and George Bush, as well as Tipper Gore and Hillary Clinton, as a tag team to visit the region over a ten-day period.

The survival of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans, and the long-term reconstruction of Honduras and Nicaragua, is going to cost billions of dollars. In the next few days and weeks, U.S. citizens have an opportunity to pressure our government to use generously our tax dollars to help rebuild in the wake of the storm. In Honduras, the U.S. government spent \$2 billion in the 1980s to combat the

threat of communism. We'll see in coming weeks whether the U.S. can be just as generous in combating a much more significant threat to life and liberty.

Aid should be channeled to sectors that support democracy as well as reconstruction. The crisis will bring to a head the latent conflict between the military and democratic sectors. Many Hondurans remember how the military got rich off international aid after Hurricane Fifi in 1974, and would prefer that nongovernmental organizations manage a major portion of the aid.

President Flores, embarrassed by the recent rating of Honduras by Transparency International as the third most corrupt country in the world, quickly moved to put politicians in charge of responding to the emergency, pushing aside the military-controlled Permanent Emergency Committee. It was a wise move, but politicians here can be just as corrupt as colonels.

The man many considered the only honest politician in the country, Tegucigalpa Mayor César Castellanos, was killed November 1 when the helicopter he was using to survey damage in the capital plummeted to earth in a fireball. "His death was as bad as the hurricane," a woman told me while she dug through the mud searching for anything salvageable in the ruins at the edge of the Choluteca River.

Plentiful assistance from church-sponsored disaster agencies--such as Church World Service, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Lutheran World Relief--will be critical in filling in the gaps in areas where local elites deny or misdirect government-controlled aid. The poor who have been ignored for centuries by the wealthy cannot expect the hurricane miraculously to create concern where none existed before. So agencies that empower the poor deserve abundant support.

Church and solidarity activists can also move up the call for debt forgiveness that has been gathering steam under the leadership of the worldwide Jubilee 2000 campaign. Honduras and Nicaragua, with foreign debts of \$4 billion and \$6.5 billion, should have their slates wiped clean. In Honduras, the government has paid one-third of the national budget--\$245 million in the first ten months of this year--to service the debt the military ran up in the 1970s and '80s.

Before the winds and rain came to wreak havoc, that northward flow of capital was already an obstacle to both economic development and the process of democratization. If it isn't stopped soon, it will mean more death and inevitable

tyranny.