THE BOLIVIAN DISASTER SURVEILLANCE DATA SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The term "surveillance," originally derived from the epidemiology of infectious disease, has been applied to various facets of public health. Nutritional surveillance programs, for instance, attempt to provide timely collection and interpretation of data for decision-making with the purpose of improving nutrition in communities (1). In the same manner, the concept of a surveillance program for disaster relief has been proposed and developed by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) (2). The aim of such programs is to obtain information so as to plan and mobilize appropriate assistance for stricken communities. The current literature vis-a-vis disaster epidemiology points to the use of such data systems during the aftermath of the disaster (2,3,4). While many natural disasters such as earthquakes are not precisely predictable, others such as droughts and floods can be anticipated more readily. Given an "early warning" system, the prediction of the effects of impending disaster can be made and appropriate measures taken to ameliorate possible mortality and morbidity.

Although the development of such systems to aid in the improvement of relief programs was recommended in the early 1960s, little has been done to implement the suggestions (5). Where operational programs do exist, as in the cases of Botswana, Indonesia, and Ethiopia, information is limited by incomplete documentation or by the newness of the program (6). This paper examines an early warning system for droughts and floods in the context of Latin America.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a surveillance system that was developed in 1984 under the auspices of the United

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