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EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS DIGEST

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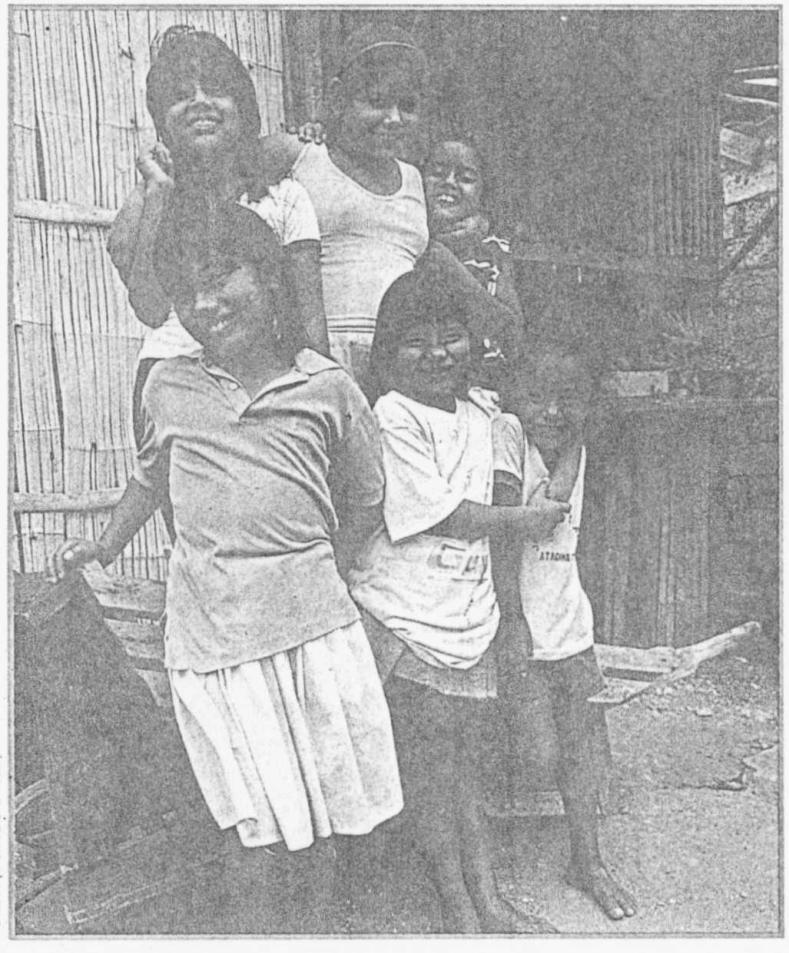
DEVELOPING EMERGENCY PREP



CIDA (Patricio Baeza)

Brett W. Mann

For responsible governments worldwide, emergency preparedness is neither a luxury nor an optional social program. Developing nations, despite a lack of the financial and technical resources that emergency planners in Canada would deem essential and take for granted, still have to provide the most effective emergency preparation and relief measures achievable.

The current status of emergency preparedness in the Central American country of Honduras illustrates emergency preparation with limited resources and highlights some key geographic, economic, and political features common to many Central American nations.

Politically, Honduras has been much more fortunate than many of its neighbours, with little or none of the history of recent civil conflict the region has suffered.

Geographically, Honduras has a relatively small population on a land mass that includes rich agricultural land, arid mountain highlands, rainforest jungle, and extensive coastlines on two oceans. Over the past hundred years Honduras has, however, been spared one common Central American problem: no serious earthquakes have occurred.

About five and a half million Hondurans are spread across 112,000 km^2, stretching from the sweltering Gulf of Fonseca on the Pacific Ocean to the wild, sparsely populated and inaccessible Mosquitia area on the Caribbean. Tropical storms (and their associated floods and landslides) can alternate seasonally with droughts and forest fires in the arid highlands. Tropical disease breeding conditions combine with overcrowding (44 per cent of the population lives in the major urban centres such as the capital of Tegucigalpa) and often inadequate sanitation and health infrastructure to make prevention and control of widespread disease a major focus of emergency planning.

FIRST RESPONDER

Primary responsibility for emergency preparation and response co-ordination in Honduras lies with the "Comisión Permanente De Contingencias" (COPECO), an organization that works closely with the Honduran military, and through committees established in the various administrative regions or "departments" of Honduras.

According to Mr. Andres Aguiriano Duarte, Director of the agency's emergency training program, COPECO's primary mission is to co-ordinate public and private sectors' response to emergencies.

COPECO is a state institution linking many public services to respond to and study emergencies. It also co-ordinates Honduras' emergency planning with other nations in the region through participation in the Centre for Co-ordination of Prevention of Natural Disasters (known by its Spanish acronym CEPREDENAC — Centro de Coordinación para la prevención de los Desastres Naturales en América Central).

Through CEPREDENAC, Honduras gives and receives help in co-operation

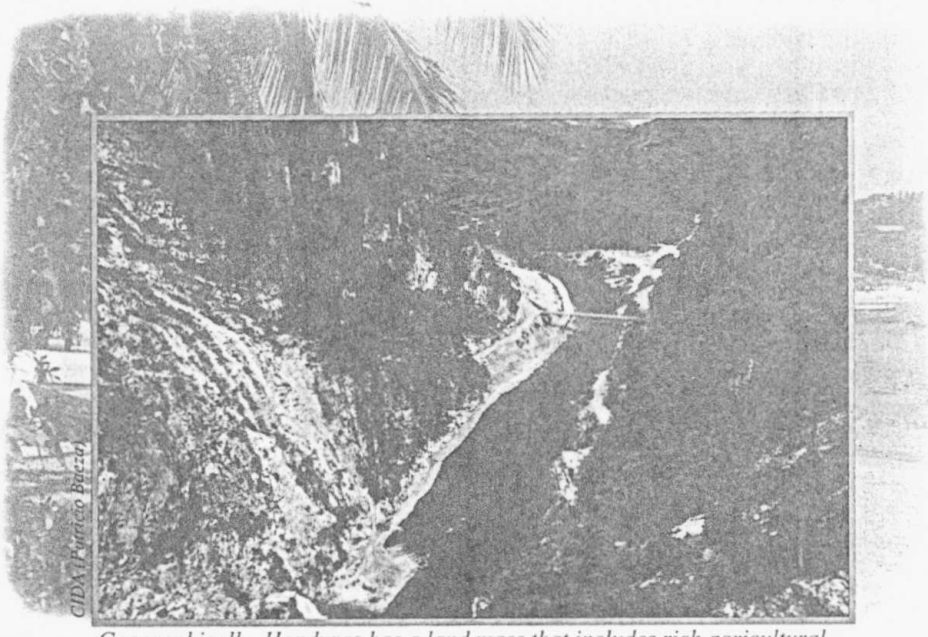
AREDNESS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

with international organizations and distributes aid to affected populations. International aid is provided by a significant number of donor countries/agencies, including Canada, the United States, Germany, France, and Italy as well as the Red Cross International and the World Food Program.

Ranking the emergency threats faced by Honduras in degree of seriousness and frequency, Mr. Aguiriano cites flooding, followed by hurricanes, forest fires, and landslides.

"In recent years, we've only recorded minor earth tremors, about a grade one level on the seismic (Richter) scale. We don't consider earthquakes a major threat. And we don't face threats from active volcanoes."

Tropical storms along the northwest Caribbean coast and heavy precipitation during the rainy season are responsible for flooding, the most frequent cause of large-scale emergencies.



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Flooding occurs generally from September to December, while damage from forest fires is highest from February to May. These fires are a particular problem in the southern zone bordering Nicaragua and El Salvador and can do great damage to timber resources and threaten population centres.

Through the training branch of COPECO Mr. Aguiriano is responsible for public emergency preparedness education. The agency deals with specialties like communications, technical operations, and training and is also responsible for overall co-ordination of emergency response.

While Honduras has some measure of emergency preparedness, there is a continuing need to improve training and response capacities. "We have more than five million inhabitants and we are only able to train about 300 per year. We'd like to increase this number. One of our main challenges is to find opportunities for greater public education. While we get invaluable international aid in actual emergency situations, we get relatively little specifically for public training and education," notes Mr. Aguiriano.

CANADA'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Since 1987 Canada has spent approximately $70 million (CDN) in development aid in Honduras. Lincoln Villanueva, Development Officer with the Canadian Consulate in Tegucigalpa, is a main local contact person in the event of emergencies and natural disasters. "Canada responds to emergencies through the International Humanitarian Assistance Program (IHA) of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)," says Mr. Villanueva.

Assistance given through the IHA Program is most often channelled through the local agencies of the United Nations Development Program and "on the ground" Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in consultation with local government levels such as the ministries of housing and health and COPECO.

"We generally prefer to work through recognized international organizations such as the Red Cross, Caritas, the UN or other NGOs that have the administrative capacity and technical competence to distribute assistance," observes Mr. Villanueva.

A recent large-scale Honduran emergency was triggered by *Tropical Storm Gert* in 1993. In the wake of that storm, Canada provided humanitarian aid in the amount of $50,000, which was chiefly used to prevent and control malaria in affected areas.

"The money was used firstly to purchase medicines, as well as other medical supplies to treat malaria, diarrhea and skin diseases. It was also