



Brett W. Mann

*There are more than five million inhabitants in Honduras. Unfortunately, only about 300 persons per year receive emergency preparedness training.*

used to purchase urgently needed construction materials and for reconstruction of latrines. The funding was channelled through the Organización Panamericana de la Salud — the Pan-American Health Organization, the regional branch of the World Health Organization — working in co-operation with COPECO, and the Honduran Ministry of Health, and they have accounted for every cent used,” says Mr. Villanueva.

A small fund can be used for some immediate response measures. An example of this was in the aftermath of *Tropical Storm Bret* some six weeks before *Gert*, when the local consulate was able to use funds from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives to provide immediate if limited aid to the victims. About \$10,000 (US) was used to set up a medical centre at La Abisinia in the storm-affected northern department of Colón.

“Again,” stresses Mr. Villanueva, “this project required co-ordinated action with COPECO, the Honduran Ministry of Health, and a local Canadian project on the ground, the ‘Hardwood Forest Project.’”

### THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID)

Canada is not the only foreign nation able to assist in Honduran emergencies. The United States, with a long-standing military presence in Honduras, would offer substantial support in the face of large-scale natural or other disasters. Support and aid would be channelled through USAID.

According to Mr. Ernest Rojas, USAID Mission Disaster Relief Officer in Honduras, many emergency planning problems still need to be addressed in Honduras.

“Flooding is a problem in many parts of the country. On the Pacific Coast, there is the possibility of a tsunami such as the one that struck Nicaragua a few years ago. To mitigate the personal loss from flooding, early warning needs to improve along the main rivers of Honduras (Ulúa, Aguan, Chamelecón, etc.). A dependable tracking system needs to be established to identify and assist disaster victims. There is no such system in place and during emergencies a substantial amount of relief items end up in the wrong hands. In addition, the flooding disasters occur year after year and the same people are being affected. The government needs to relocate these people to safer zones or provide adequate flood prevention measures. Droughts are also a problem in the western part of Honduras. Availability of electricity in emergencies can also be a problem because the country is overly dependent on one major hydroelectric source,” says Mr. Rojas.

With regard to training resources, Mr. Rojas notes that projects such as the “Partners in America Program” provide training for schoolchildren in preparation for earthquakes and flooding, and that the United States provides about \$150,000 a year for training and emergency preparedness in Honduras.

### THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF DISEASE CONTROL

Natural and technological disasters in tropical countries present the additional spectre of disease epidemics, exacerbated by heat, lack of clean water, and inadequate sanitation infrastructure. Concerns about massive public health risks are grounded in past experience such as the reported 75,000 cases

of malaria in the five months following a hurricane that struck Haiti in October 1963. While malaria is more of a risk in the sparsely populated Mosquitia department in the Caribbean northeast, public health threats from flooding, including cholera, are a reality in many parts of the country.

Mr. Gonzalo A. Ordonez, Country Engineer with the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) in Tegucigalpa, plays a key role in prevention and control of diseases in emergencies. As the designated Environmental Health Consultant, Mr. Ordonez is responsible for the

supply of water and sanitation services and would be deeply involved in the PAHO emergency/disaster response system.

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**While Honduras has some measure of emergency preparedness, there is a continuing need to improve training and response capacities.**

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Recalling recent occasions when his agency, which essentially functions as a regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO), has responded to public health emergencies, Mr. Ordonez mentions *Tropical Storm Gert*, and the flooding of the Aguan Valley in 1993:

"About 30 died as a result of *Tropical Storm Gert*, while the Aguan Valley flooding left about 300 people dead or missing. The large number of casualties resulted when a temporary earthen blockage of the river gave way and flash flooding occurred. Material damage was heavy, with much housing and infrastructure damaged. Controlling cholera outbreaks was a problem."

The same rain system affected the southern part of Honduras, and a cholera epidemic in the area of Choluteca caused close to 2,000 cases of the disease, and dozens of deaths. Prior to these cases, in general, cholera was not an acute problem in Honduras.

Saying that the PAHO contribution was mainly to alleviate dangerous health conditions, Mr. Ordonez points out, "the United Nations Disaster Program was also critically involved, particularly in the Mosquitia area after storms *Gert* and *Bret*. There was a lot

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*Heavy rains could produce earthslides in the steeply hilled capital of Tegucigalpa, as happened during a tropical hurricane in 1989. This put hundreds of people out of their homes.*

of flooding in these areas and the only transportation in is by air or sea. People lost their crops and houses and in some places there were problems with hunger and cholera. Cholera remains a problem still, with some, but not particularly severe outbreaks."

The Honduran Ministry of Health works closely with PAHO to monitor and control health threats, Mr. Ordonez remarks, and the threat of epidemics is one that has to be monitored very carefully.

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While the bulk of serious emergencies have occurred in the north and south as a result of flooding, heavy rains could produce earthslides in the steeply hilled capital of Tegucigalpa, as happened during a tropical hurricane in 1989. This put hundreds of people out of their homes.

Reflecting on the sources of internal and external support available for emergency management, Mr. Ordonez expresses confidence in overall levels of preparedness. "The Honduran military, through COPECO, offers a lot of help. They provide critical functions such as transportation and communications, and have regional committees established throughout Honduras.

"We have a National Emergency Plan, which was updated two years ago by COPECO in consultation with other institutions, and this is our chief source of guidance in emergency response. I think our recent problems have shown that the ability to respond is at acceptable levels."

For those responsible for emergency preparedness in countries like Honduras, the requirement to anticipate and plan for all potential disasters is tightly constrained by resource limitations. Nonetheless, Honduras has shown what can be achieved through the careful setting of priorities and concentrating on training and close co-operation with other regional and international authorities.

*Brett W. Mann is a freelance writer based in Belleville, Ontario.*

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