

Hurricane Gilbert

At the 1988 Hurricane Conference, held in the USA last April, a prediction was made that the Caribbean region, which had experienced an unusually low number of hurricanes for almost a decade, was likely to be affected by several of these severe weather systems in the course of the coming months. Participants at the conference, including a number of emergency management officials from the Caribbean, wondered how the countries of the region would cope when "normal" hurricane behavior resumed.

The period since 1980 had seen a significant investment in disaster management training, technical assistance, improved telecommunication resources and the strengthening of national institutional capacity for disaster response, through the UNDRO/PAHO/LRCS Pan Caribbean Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Project (PCDPPP). The following article summarizes the effects of, and response to, Hurricane Gilbert, when it swept through the Caribbean region in mid-October.

Hurricane Gilbert, developed from Tropical Depression No 12 of the 1988 Hurricane Season, will go down in the record books as the most powerful and one of the most devastating North Atlantic cyclones. Gilbert's intensity and impact will ensure that it is not soon forgotten. The name Gilbert will probably be retired, or not used for several years, from the list operating in the Atlantic region.

Jamaica

Described as the worst natural disaster in Jamaica's history, Hurricane Gilbert struck the country with an impressive force on Monday, 12 September, leaving a trail of destruction never before experienced. Two days earlier UNDRO had already issued an information report warning of the probability of Gilbert hitting the country.

On the island, the Jamaican authorities declared a Hurricane Watch on Saturday evening 10 September, and a Hurricane Warning the following day. Arrange-

ments were made for shops which would normally close on Sundays to remain open to ensure that the public could stock up on emergency items, and plans which the Jamaican authorities had been preparing since 1980 were implemented.

It appears that although many Jamaicans heard the watch and warning information they did not take them seriously until late on Sunday the 11th. As a consequence some avoidable losses occurred, when Gilbert struck with winds of up to 125 mph. The hurricane moved across Jamaica from East to West tearing off roofs, destroying vegetation and damaging the infrastructure. The hurricane winds lasted approximately 10 to 12 hours with the eye passing directly over the country.

Shortly after the disaster, the Project Manager of PCDPPP arrived as UNDRO's delegate to support Government efforts in assessing the damage and ascertaining the type and amount of external assistance needed.

The number of deaths was low considering the intensity of the Hurricane; only 43 dead and hardly any injured. The damage to the island was estimated at over US \$800 million. An estimated one-fifth of the housing sector was either wrecked or severely damaged. Thousands of Jamaicans were forced to seek refuge in emergency shelters which soon became overcrowded. The situation was made worse by the fact that many designated shelters were damaged by the hurricane. At least 500,000 people were made homeless.

Electricity and water supplies were cut off and many water mains were broken. Telephone and communication services, both national and international, were severely disrupted.

Gilbert left the streets of Kingston, and many other towns and highways throughout the island, littered with downed utility poles and power lines, fallen billboards, trees, branches, street signs and traffic lights. After a few days, electricity and water supplies were