

Date

March 1988

Location

Countrywide

No. Dead

None

No. Affected

2,000,000

The Disaster

The roots of the food emergency in Panama in March 1988 stem from a political crisis which began the previous year. Since June 1987, Panamanians had held demonstrations and launched general strikes in an attempt to oust the discredited commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), General Manuel Antonio Noriega Morena. Political tensions culminated on Feb. 25, 1988, when President Eric Arturo Del Valle tried to dismiss the General, but with no success. General Noriega subsequently used Panama's legislative body, which was dominated by his own supporters, to replace President Del Valle with the General's own appointee.

In an attempt to pressure Noriega out of power, the Reagan administration imposed economic sanctions on Panama, resulting in the Panamanian government's inability to pay salaries to its public sector, the nation's largest employer of the middle class. In mid-March, thousands of teachers, doctors, telecommunications workers, and other public-sector employees joined anti-government protests. The civil unrest temporarily paralyzed economic activity, resulting in a lack of cash to buy food and other basic necessities.

Action Taken by the Government of Panama (GOP) and Non-Governmental Organizations

Deposed Panamanian President Del Valle appealed to the international community to send food to Panama for people who did not have the money to purchase it themselves. The Ecumenical Emergency Coordinator (Spanish acronym CEEP) in Panama, comprising representatives from Panama's Evangelical Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Baptist Church of Arrajan, and the Lutheran Church, organized an emergency feeding project for the poor. CEEP appealed for financial support to the WCC's Commission on Interchurch Aid, Refugees and World Service (CICARWS). Caritas/Panama distributed food to low-income families. The GOP, concurrently, was channeling food aid through the Panamanian Red Cross.

Assistance Provided by the U.S. Government

On March 24, Ambassador Arthur H. Davis declared a disaster in Panama as a result of the scarcity of cash. He released \$25,000 of his disaster authority to Caritas/Panama for the purchase of food. OFDA augmented this initial grant to Caritas by obligating an additional \$25,000 under the Ambassador's authority and sending one of OFDA's regional disaster management advisors, Alejandro James, from Costa Rica to work with the Embassy and Caritas in organizing food distribution. Upon receiving requests from Ambassador Davis and Caritas for additional funds to expand and extend the food program, OFDA gave another \$190,000 for the purchase of food, and \$16,968 to support Caritas's operational expenses.

TOTAL \$256,968

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

CARE - provided technical assistance to Caritas/Panama to improve monitoring and support of the emergency food program.

CWS - appealed for \$150,000 in food aid for Panama.

Assistance Provided by the International Community

WCC - appealed for \$100,000 to support relief activities in Panama.

Flood

Paraguay

Date

May - September
1988

Location

Paraguay River from
Bahia Negra (near
the borders of Brazil,
Bolivia, and
Paraguay) to Alberdi
(south of the capital
of Asuncion)

No. Dead

0

No. Affected

30,000; 15,000
homeless

Damage

Extensive damage
occurred to buildings
and public utilities;
cattle perished.

The Disaster

Above-average precipitation in Brazil and Bolivia resulted in flooding along the Paraguay River in Paraguay. Initial reports in mid-March indicated that the headwaters of the river in Mato Grosso State, Brazil, were above normal seasonal levels. In early May, the Paraguay River reached an all-time high of 6.97 meters in Bahia Negra, a town near where the borders of Paraguay, Brazil, and Bolivia meet. Approximately 15,000 inhabitants along the banks were forced to relocate onto higher ground. In total, about 30,000 people were affected with up to 40% receiving some form of food aid. Many buildings required replacement or repair of walls, doors, etc. Small cattle herders withstood considerable destruction to their livestock due to a lack of forage. Those whose livelihood depended on the river (charcoal makers, roof tile manufacturers, vegetable farmers, and fishermen) suffered a great loss of productivity.

Action Taken by the Government of Paraguay (GOP) and Non-Governmental Organizations

As reports indicated that the Paraguay River would be higher than normal, the GOP established a special commission of the legislative branch to evaluate the situation and recommend measures to protect the affected population. This commission coordinated the relief effort and issued a formal appeal of assistance. The Paraguayan Armed Forces were put on alert and assisted in the emergency.

Volunteers from the Paraguayan Red Cross, specially trained in emergency management, distributed food, blankets, and plastic sheeting in some of the larger communities along the river. About 14,000 people received clothing, blankets, food, and emergency shelter material in 20 locations. The Paraguayan Navy provided transport for the goods and personnel along the river. For those victims who did not flee their homes, Red Cross workers constructed temporary platforms above water level within the dwellings.

Assistance Provided by the U.S.

Government

Between May 9 and 17, OFDA regional disaster management advisor Rene Carrillo visited Paraguay to assess the situation. He toured the stricken area in a locally leased airplane, which OFDA funded at a cost of \$1,200. On June 24, 1988, U.S. Ambassador Timothy Towell declared a state of emergency from the flooding and donated \$25,000 to the Paraguayan Red Cross. The assistance was used to purchase blankets and construction material and to cover operating expenses. As temporary shelter material was a major priority, OFDA also provided \$30,000 to cover its shipment of 181 rolls of plastic sheeting, valued at \$52,490. The DOD flight of commodities arrived on June 30 from OFDA's stockpile in Panama. *[Note: Only 134 rolls of plastic sheeting were replaced in the stockpile in FY 1989 at a cost of \$38,847.]*

Both the emergency funds and material were presented to the Paraguayan Red Cross on July 1. Mr. Carrillo accompanied the shipment on a return trip to Paraguay where he monitored distribution of the sheeting. He reported that the material's timely arrival prevented the onset of bronchio-pulmonary infections common to such emergencies. OFDA representatives visited Paraguay again between Sept. 7 and 9 to evaluate the use of USG assistance.

Total FY 1988	\$56,200
Total FY 1989	\$38,847

TOTAL	\$95,047
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Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

CRS - gave medicine and clothing worth \$190,000.

TOTAL	\$190,000
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Assistance Provided by the International Community

China, Rep. (Taiwan) - sent aid worth \$6,000.

Germany, Fed. Rep. - donated \$11,000 worth of emergency assistance.

Japan - contributed relief assistance, valued at \$20,000.

LRCS - provided \$30,000 for medicine, food, and operating expenses.

Spain Red Cross - supplied \$4,800 for medicine and emergency items.

WFP - furnished powdered milk, wheat flour, canned fish, and dry beans, estimated value at \$54,000.

TOTAL	\$125,800
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