

United Nations Development Programme



Sustainable Human Development

A Preliminary Assessment of Damages caused by Hurricane "Mitch" ***Prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and*** ***The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)*** ***For the IDB Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction of Central America***

1. Overview

On 24 October Atlantic Tropical Storm Mitch was upgraded to Hurricane status and transformed itself into one of the strongest and most damaging storms ever to hit the Caribbean and Central America. During the following week it swept across Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize and Costa Rica, even while the eye remained some 150 km offshore. It then became stationary off the Caribbean coast of Honduras, causing torrential rains, flooding, landslides and high intensity winds. At its height, on 26 and 27 October, the hurricane reached Category 5 (the highest), one of only four hurricanes to reach this level during the 20th century in a region often hit by tropical storms. During this period it sustained winds of almost 300 km per hour and dumped heavy rains all over Central America.

The effects of the natural disaster were aggravated by man-made factors. Population pressures had resulted in large-scale deforestation and the cultivation of marginal lands without proper soil conservation. These conditions left communities vulnerable to deadly floods and mudslides. Flooding was aggravated by lack of adequate watershed management.

The poor bear the brunt of disasters like "Mitch" since they have restricted access to land and often must live in marginal, high-risk areas, such as the banks of rivers and in gullies. Many of the poorest have been hit twice, as "Mitch" washed away both their homes as well as their sources of income. "Mitch" aggravated pre-existing social conditions, such as unequal access to employment, land and social services. The recovery process should incorporate a balance between the immediate needs for rehabilitation and the need to improve the underlying social and economic relations.

2. The Humanitarian Toll

Preliminary estimates reveal the following humanitarian impact in the most affected countries:

	Honduras	Nicaragua	Guatemala	El Salvador	Total
1. Dead	7,007	2,863	268	240	10,378
2. Missing	8,052 ¹	948	121	19	9,140
3. Wounded	11,998	388	280	n.a.	12,666 ²
4. In Shelters	285,000	65,271 ³	50,000 ⁴	55,864	456,135
5. Total Evacuated	617,831	370,641	108,594	84,316	1,181,382
6. Total Affected Population ⁵	4,753,537 ⁶	867,752	734,198	346,910	6,702,397
7. Total Population ⁷	6,203,188	4,492,700	11,645,900	6,075,536	28,417,324
8. Percentage Affected	76.6	19.3	6.4	5.7	23.6

¹ As of 9 November 1998

² Does not include wounded for El Salvador.

³ As of 26 November 1998

⁴ As of 15 November 1998

⁵ Includes the dead, injured and homeless as well as those who suffered material and economic losses. Source for definition: ECLAC

⁶ This includes both the primary affected population (estimated at 2.1 million in OCHA Situation Report #14) and the secondary affected population, which includes city inhabitants still without basic services.

⁷ Estimated as October 1998; source: CELADE