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## IMPACT OF HURRICANE MITCH ON CENTRAL AMERICA

During the two-week period from 22 October to 2 November, Central America was battered by Hurricane Mitch, a gale that became a maximum force hurricane with winds of nearly 290 km per hour. Lingering over the region, the hurricane moved at the rate of 8 to 11 kilometers per hour, with several days of continuing rain along the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. It then moved to the Gulf of Honduras, producing heavy downpours from the Atlantic Coast to the far western reaches of the country and causing major flooding. The rains finally shifted to the Pacific region of Nicaragua, precipitating mudslides on the Casitas Volcano and additional flooding in the eastern areas of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize.

Hurricane Mitch struck when Central America was just recovering from the economic effects of El Niño 1997-1998 phenomenon, whose floods, forest fires, and droughts had weakened the countries' productive systems. The images of Central America left by Hurricane Mitch reveal the vulnerability of the region in all its magnitude, a place where violent natural phenomena turn into disasters that affect the bulk of the population.

Table 1 presents a summary of the hurricane's impact on Central America, in absolute terms of its effect on the population, housing, and infrastructure of the countries.

Based on the reports received, Honduras and Nicaragua were the countries most damaged by Hurricane Mitch, followed by Guatemala and El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, Costa Rica and Belize. Beyond the irreparable toll in human lives lost, the impact on the region's production and its sustaining infrastructure represents a severe setback for the development of the region and will increase the already high dependence on external assistance and financing.

Due to the damage in some countries to the health services, water and sanitation networks, to overcrowding in shelters, or to population movements between neighboring countries, the incidence of cholera and other waterborne diseases, leptospirosis, dengue, and malaria has increased, particularly in urban areas and among the more impoverished and marginal groups. Initial health activities have been directed toward the immediate treatment of cases, epidemiological surveillance, solid waste management, water disinfection, food protection, and vector control.

A more detailed assessment of damaged areas and population affected by country is given below:

**HONDURAS.** The hurricane lingered off the Atlantic Coast of Honduras for a three-day period. Its heavy rains

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