

BELIZE CITY EXPERIENCED WITH MITCH

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Belize City is the most populated area within the country of Belize, with a population of approximately 55,000 people and an estimated 20,000 more within the rural areas. It is the old capital but the Industrial Capital of the Country. The international airport is only 20 minutes away, the biggest port is within the city limits, the major hotels and conference facilities are located here, well, this is where everything happens in Belize. The district include Belize City, and 15 small villages, San Pedro Town on Ambergris Caye, and Caye Caulker which are nearby surrounding islands. Belize City is approximately one foot below sea level with two main rivers flowing within the district and other creeks within the villages in the rural area.

The former government in 1998, had a disaster plan called the National Emergency Management Plan for Hurricane Preparedness. This plan never incorporated the Belize City Council or any of the municipalities within the country of Belize. Persons responsible for the implementation and activation of the relevant committees were Permanent Secretaries assigned to various government ministries.

National elections were held on August 27th 1998. The government lost and the People's United Party won 26 seats. During the month of September, various celebrations and activities are held from the 1 to the 21 which is our independence day. So, a lot of parting was going on in the City. The country of Belize, within the past 30 years, never experienced a hurricane in late October. The worst was in 1961 with Hurricane Hatti and only three of the then Councillors had experienced a category 4 hurricane. No one was expecting a hurricane of a Category 5 status such as Mitch.

The treat of Hurricane Mitch necessitated a frenzy of the disaster preparedness activities to be undertaken by the Belizean populace and the Government of Belize during the period of October 25th to the 30th 1998.

The power of Mitch was estimated at a time clocked at a 180 miles per hour wind, with an estimated twenty-five foot tidal wave. Its devastated tentacles extended throughout the entire Caribbean, which included the Coast of Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and the Yucatan Peninsula. The expected damages from Hurricane Mitch forecasted through the National Weather Service which indicated that 15-25 inches of rainfall were possible which could cause life threatening flash floods and mud slides. Dangerous Coastal Flooding due to strong onshore winds and large waves could be expected over tropical storm warning areas.

The tracking of Mitch commenced on Thursday October 22nd, 1998. On Friday the Meteorology Department advised agencies of possible emergency over the weekend. On Sunday they convened with the National Emergency Management Organization to declare a disaster because of the Category 5 projection of Mitch. The Belize City Council was immediately contacted and the Council convened a meeting at 8:00 p.m. to work on an evacuation plan for the Belize District. Since the Belize City Council was in opposition politically when the National Emergency Management Organization Plan was planned, and did not partake in it and did not have any knowledge as to what our responsibilities were as a Council we had to do quite a bit of damage control since, most of us were going to the election polls within the next few months.

However, the Cabinet Secretary and Coordinator, the Belize City Council and the newly elected government at the same time during Mitch were of the same political party. Joint coalition and every effort was made to ensure the safety of the Belizean populace. The Belize City Council immediately came up with a strategic evacuation plan for the entire district of Belize. This was necessary since the National Plan was there but there was no evacuation plan for the City. Boats were contacted; barges were used to evacuate people from the neighboring islands of San Pedro and Caye Caulker. The Belize City Council contacted their employees to

start assisting with securing of the Council's assets and property. Over 75 percent of our employees have never been trained in evacuation or disaster preparedness. This, however, did not impair them from working to secure the City's properties and assets.

The evacuation of tourist commenced throughout the islands and coastal area of Belize. Buildings were then secured. Hurricane shelters, which were mainly elementary schools, were used and most of them have not been repaired during the past five years. Quite a few problems were encountered at the shelters.

There is only one main highway going north and west to higher grounds. This created a major traffic problems within Belize, Orange Walk and Cayo District. If we had a high tide along with the rains, most people would have been trapped whilst the evacuation was going on.

While all this was going on the Meteorology Department went through some disappointing times. This included

- ◆ Lightening knocked out a Synoptic Section
 - VSAT/STAR-4
 - Rawindsonde system
 - Internet computer
 - One APT/WEFAX SYSTEM
 - Telephone circuit
- ◆ Geo stationary Observing Environmental Satellite East fails (GOES)
- ◆ AWS on two offshore islands, Halfmoon Caye – East of Belize City Hunting Caye – East of Punta Gorda, fail (it was actual buried under sand).

The Meteorology Department of Cuba assisted us with up to date information. We thank them.

The media coverage was excellent. There were 24 hours services of coverage during this period.

Since most media personnel were not familiar with the terminology being utilized by the

Meteorologist, they did not embark accurate layman terms information to the Belizean populace.

This caused some controversy when the government declared evacuation for the islands and the coastal areas.

Cellular phones were utilized as the main source of communications. As a result of this, there were tremendous interruptions, and all lines were tied up making it extremely difficult to communicate. The Airport Authority, the Hospital, the Fire Station, and the Police were on various frequencies and would have been able to communicate in the event of a disaster. The Belize City Hospital, which is the major hospital within the country of Belize, was unprepared for a disaster of this magnitude. No temporary supplies were at the shelters, transporting of medicine care for the dying, etc. The Belize Red Cross was helpful in assisting the government with setting up centers in the schools.

Evaluating Mitch made the Belize City Council and the Government of Belize realized that it was unprepared for a hurricane of anything higher than a category three as well as any other emergency manmade or natural disaster. As a result of this the Government of Belize, through CEDRA made consultation and evaluated the National Emergency Management Organization Plan. The plan was revised and an updated revision was published in April of 1999.

The Belize City Council agrees with the present Mayor that we will evaluate Belize City and its rural areas and make recommendations for any disasters that can occur.

The Belize City Council lobbied and consulted with the Government of Belize to ensure that the Belize City Council had representation on all sub committees in respect to the National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO). Today the Belize City Council has a representative on nearly all NEMO Committees.

As a result of the revised hurricane preparedness plan, a Secretariat Office was formed and is located in the capital, Belmopan. The new and improved plan defines the responsibilities of the different committees, agencies and organizations. It properly establishes the command structure for the districts and the town emergency committees. Because of the unique situation in respect

to San Pedro and Caye Caulker, allocation was made for a chairperson to assist these areas, which is the area representative.

Areas of training since April are as follows:

The Government had invited the Council to participate in various workshops and symposium regarding natural disaster

- I. The Red Cross Society conducted a shelter warden workshop for thirty Belize Defense Force instructors
- II. The Pan American Health Organization held a two days conference for health officials in emergency management
- III. The United States Southern Command conducted a training symposium on disaster relief planning for thirty middle managers.
- IV. Disaster Preparedness Conference in Mexico City which was attended by two persons

The National Disaster Coordinator and his deputy met with all Mayors from the eight municipalities, the entire Belize City Council and all the operational committees chairman, the aim was to explain the new plan of action of NEMO and answer all their queries. All Mayors were appointed as Deputy Chairpersons for the districts except for Belize City which the Prime Minister Heads the Belize District area.

Exercise Millennium Breeze was a five-day exercise with the objective of testing the new hurricane plan. It is divided into two distinct phases.

Phase I: Committee briefings

Phase II: National hurricane exercise.

Parts of the exercise were simulated with real time penalties. There were a physical movement of cargo and foodstuff, the evacuation of people, the planning of shelters and feeding of both exercise troops and civilian in shelter was practiced.

Conclusion from exercise Millennium Breeze were successful to the extent that most of what was intended to achieve was achieved.

- A To increase public awareness. This was not as successful as desired
- B To establish and clearly define the authorities of Government in disaster and emergency management. Achieved for the most part except with the authority and responsibility of government was not clearly defined
- C To define a coordinating mechanism necessary for public and private sector and NGO to utilize their services. This was not very well done, need quite a bit of work.
- D To practice the execution of the national hurricane plan as it relates to the threat of a hurricane. This was achieved.
- E Exercise designated personnel and organizations in the performance of a sign disaster response function including the evacuation plan and the government vehicle security plan. This was achieved for the most part. However, vehicle security plan needs more work.
- F Exercise response mechanism and coordination among external agencies in support of disaster response in Belize. This area was not achieved.
- G Determine the availability of resources for disaster response in Belize. Achieved for the most part.
- H Identify opportunities for enhancement of Belize disaster response capabilities based on the observation deemed from above. Achieved
- I To exercise the notation of the public, to implement impending disasters. Achieved
- J To test the emergency communication plan. The emergency plan was tested and it showed many flaws that will be corrected for the future
- K To test the procedure for activation for the shelter management plan including receiving evacuees in shelter. This was achieved. However, the Belize City Council continuously gathers information in respect to assist the emergency management plan, which will focus on manmade and natural disasters.

The newly elected Belize City Council is ready and better prepared to deal with any situation that will arise this year in respect to hurricanes. We are also acquiring technical assistance in improving our building code, updating legislation, supplies preparedness, and other areas which we have identified. However, training in areas of evacuation, plan preparation, mitigation etc. is required and will be working very closely with NEMO headquarters to ensure that all personnel will be receiving adequate training this year.

Belize City lost approximately 2million dollars in infrastructure damages, revenue and in other economic areas of the private sector.

Because of our experience with Mitch, both the Mayor and myself as deputy have been preparing the Council and the residents of the City about being prepared This is vital since we were not prepared for Mitch and it is predicted that 4 hurricane with category 5 status will be in our región.