

THE ONSET OF MITCH AND IMMEDIATE UN RESPONSE

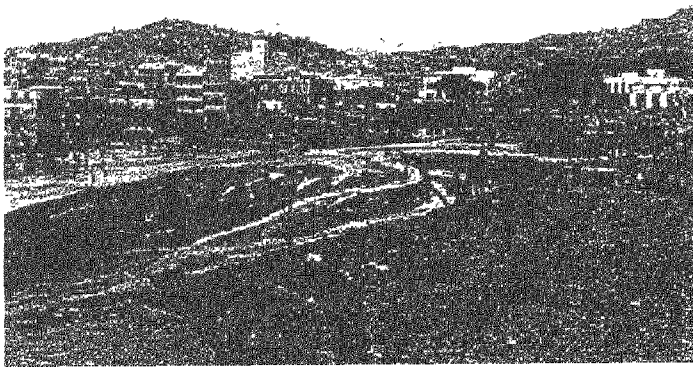
Co-ordination between the UN System and national authorities was present from the very first national **warning** on the coming of a tropical storm on Sunday afternoon, **25 October**, putting on alert the population of the North coast and the Bay Islands. The same evening, a Government official consulted with a member of the UN Disaster Management Team (UNDMT). The following day, the UNDMT started daily meetings and consultations with the Government which, during the first days, relied to a large extent on the UN office for liaison with the international community and the issuance of daily bulletins. UN agencies immediately activated their mechanisms for rapid response such as the immediate release of food and funds for immediate relief assistance. By Tuesday 27 November, an experienced emergency officer from WHO/PAHO arrived to support the local office in addressing the impending emergency, representing the first UN input to enter the country in the context of Mitch.

On Wednesday **28 October**, as the Northern part of the country was in the eye of the storm, by then upgraded to a scale 5 hurricane, UNDMT organised a meeting with **donors**, the Red Cross and NGOs, with the participation of a SETCO representative, to discuss actions to be taken and take stock of the capacity of each to address immediate relief needs (three such meetings were held during that week). The same day, the UNDMT requested from OCHA the dispatch of an UNDAC team and this was officially communicated to COPECO. A UN team was already at work in San Pedro Sula, where WFP had a representative, managing the distribution of various relief items, including water, food, blankets and medicine. The first medical team, financed by UNICEF, also arrived in the same area (a UNICEF Health Officer was also redeployed to work with the Ministry of Health).

Exemplary **co-operation** between UN System agencies led to the pooling of their immediately available resources, i.e. food released by WFP from its in-country stocks was transported and distributed with assistance from UNICEF. WHO/PAHO was the focal point for health and UNICEF was requested to act as focal point for the supply of water. From funds released by UNICEF, WHO, UNDP and OCHA, fuel and vehicles were immediately made available to various national rescue and evaluation teams and essential relief items were procured, including clean water and water tanks, blankets and medicines. All these actions were closely co-ordinated with Government services and NGOs.

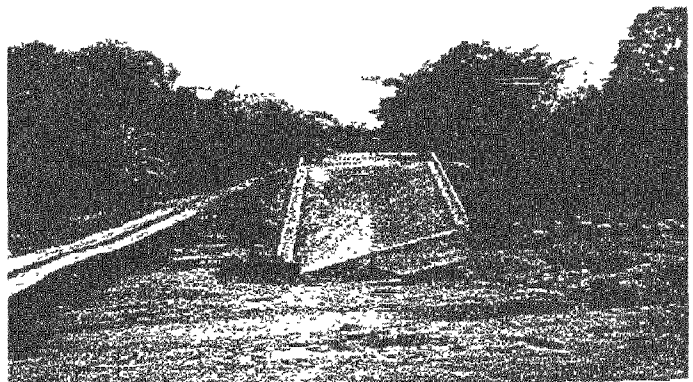
On Thursday **29 October**, as the hurricane was slowly moving South, and after major damages were reported in the North, the President made an **appeal** for international assistance and established a National Committee to oversee the Emergency (**CONE**) chaired by himself and composed of ministers responsible each for one of the ten departments most affected or at-risk. UNDP and UNICEF assisted the setting up of the CONE Liaison and Information Office by immediately providing staff, together with the required furniture and equipment, including computers, telephones and fax equipment.

Torrential rains and **flooding** of biblical proportions then hit the whole country, and the central lower part of the capital city of Tegucigalpa suffered most casualties (some 1500 dead reported) and damages during the night of **30-31 October** when obstructions in the main river (fed from torrential rains channelled from the surrounding mountains) were caused by a landslide. By then, the co-ordination mechanisms set up by UNDMT were fully operational and UN relief operations underway. The UNDAC arrived in the country after the resumption of regular flights. Meanwhile, search and **rescue teams** and emergency experts were flown in by several countries, together with relief items, and including small boats for rescue and relief operations along the coast and up rivers in the North. PAHO member countries' **medical brigades** also arrived early and were dispatched to various areas of the country in full co-ordination with the Ministry of Health.



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CODERs and CODEMs first faced with immense difficulties owing to communication problems with the destruction of roads, bridges and the interruption of telecommunications, gradually provided CONE with provisional **assessments** of damages, with particular reference to the high level of human casualties, including the number of people displaced and provided with temporary accommodation in public

COPECO (Commission Permanente de Contingencias) concludes that, despite serious constraints such as the lack of necessary equipment and other resources as well as changes in the relevant authorities and staffing, the loss of human life and damages to production and infrastructures caused by Mitch were reduced in those departments covered by the project compared with the 1974 disaster (Fifi) or with the losses of other departments not covered by the project where the population was less prepared

While **SETCO**, the Ministry of Technical Cooperation, has overall responsibilities for cooperation programmes of the UN and the international community in general, **COPECO** has been the traditional liaison office for emergencies. Reporting directly to the President through one of three "Presidential Appointees" who more or less act as Vice-Presidents (the establishment of a post of Vice President is under consideration), **COPECO**'s strength resides in its decentralised structure with the existence of **CODERs** at the regional level and **CODEMs** at the municipal level whose role is to promote disaster preparedness and mitigation measures and coordinate disaster relief (since 1996, UNICEF has been supporting municipalities in planning and programming) At the central level, **COPECO** has had a limited capacity and perhaps not the political clout and support needed to ensure full effectiveness in a disaster situation of Mitch scope