

4. CIDA's Communication with the Canadian Public

Finding 53: During the emergency phase of Hurricane Mitch, CIDA's Communication Division fulfilled its mandate. However, this mandate is targeted and does not include a specific communication strategy for disaster.

Interviews with CIDA and its stakeholders indicate that the media surrounding the Hurricane Mitch disaster was well managed. This was due, in part, to the role played by the Communications Division of CIDA. The Communication Division is comprised of four components: media relations, speeches, briefings, and regional events.

During the emergency, a representative of the Division accompanied Minister Marleau to Honduras, provided briefings to the media upon her return, and prepared announcements for the Minister for the House of Commons. The Division's target audiences were the media, parliamentarians, and the general public. The overall perception is that the Communication Division sent out consistent messages from CIDA, DFAIT, and DND to the Canadian public, and that those messages were delivered in a timely manner in English and in French.

While they fulfilled their role in keeping the Canadian public informed, more needs to be done in communicating to the public how they can best support humanitarian efforts. Hurricane Mitch generated an enormous amount of public interest, but the Canadian public was not clearly informed about how to get information or provide support during the emergency.

Once it became known the extent to which Hurricane Mitch had affected Central America, the Canadian public began to contact CIDA with offers of help, donations of money and goods, and opportunities for CIDA to purchase goods for emergency and reconstruction projects. Calls were not routed to one number within the Agency but were directed to a range of individuals in the Americas Branch, IHA, Public Affairs, as well as the general information receptionist for the Agency. The challenge facing CIDA was the lack of coordination that existed internally between these various sections of the Agency, which caused various inefficiencies. For example, the Bilateral Desk was informed by chance that Public Information had modified an existing document that provided standard answers to the public as to how the public should respond in a case of an emergency. Once Bilateral Branch received this document, responses to standard questions became easier.

The introduction of the Canadian Red Cross as the coordinator of NGO efforts in Canada alleviated some of the strain from CIDA, as it provided a focal point for inquiries. Nevertheless, the public continued to contact CIDA for information.

The communications desk does not have a special strategy or set of guidelines that are used for emergency situations. During Hurricane Mitch, the Communications Desk responded in a reactive way at first. As time went by, informal communication plans began to take shape, although these appeared to be directed at communicating information to public officials and the media, rather than to other CIDA divisions. Some divisions were receiving recurrent phone calls from concerned individuals, and did not have clear directions as to how to redirect these calls.