



On the Record: Central American Civil Society After Mitch (1999)

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Contents:

- **Honduras – In the Eye of the Storm**
 - **Hurricane versus Honduras**
 - **Misusing the Land**
 - **Land Ownership**
 - **The Regional and International Dimension**
 - **Mitch Pounces**
- **Urgent – Guatemalan Land Activist Disappears**
- **Latin Caucus Protests “Hypocrisy” of US Aid Deadlock**

From the AP Editorial Desk

Hurricane Mitch began as a tropical storm 360 miles to the south of Jamaica on the afternoon of October 21, 1998. On October 27, it began to move west. For two days, it lingered off the north coast of Honduras, as if toying with the weather pundits.

Instead of moving west, as expected, Mitch then dipped to the south. Over the next week, it hovered over Honduras. At the same time, a current of hot air came up from the south and invaded the pacific side of the country. The amount of water that fell defied all predictions: Choluteca, in south Honduras, received 900 millimeters in a day. La Ceiba, on the north coast, got more rain in one day than London in an entire year.

This issue of 'On the Record' looks at what happened in the days that followed, and why the result was so destructive.

Honduras – In the Eye of the Storm

Hurricane versus Honduras

The capital of Honduras presented Mitch with a choice target. Tegucigalpa is a sprawl, rather than a city. Its center is situated along the banks of the Choluteca river valley, and the buildings extend upwards, culminating in shanty towns that cling precariously to the side of the mountain. Most of the inhabitants are poor, driven from the interior of Honduras by declining incomes and the lure of the big city.

The valley acted like a funnel, and turned the Choluteca into a raging torrent of mud and water that split the city in two. Down in the valley, people, cars, and buildings were swept away. So much silt and mud built up against the side of the el Berrinche hospital, that three stories were completely blocked. In the hills, entire shantytowns collapsed and disappeared. Of the 184 barrios, or shanties, 25 were damaged or destroyed.

Hondurans began to feel that they had been targeted by a malevolent force. Mitch Versus Honduras, ran the headline in a special issue of the paper La Prensa. It had become almost personal. A hurricane against an entire country.

Everyone has their own memories of Mitch. Diana Velasquez lived in the barrio of La Soto, which was situated on the lower slopes, near the river. Diana rushed out to a supermarket to get supplies, only to find looters stripping the shelves. She returned to see a river of mud sliding through La Soto. Friends were trying to rescue things from their houses.

They asked her if she needed help. Disbelievingly, she replied no. As she watched, her house collapsed. Two houses away, one of her neighbors refused to leave. A beam crashed down on his head, and his house split open around him. La Soto was one of several urban communities that disappeared completely.

Down in the national jail, there was terror and confusion. The jail lay on the banks of the Choluteca. Built for 600, it held 2,300 prisoners at the time of Mitch and many panicked as the water quickly rose, particularly those prisoners in solitary confinement. Film footage showed prisoners diving into the river to escape. Several were reportedly shot by prison guards. Others were asked if they wanted to escape, for a bribe of 300 lempiras (\$20).

Late at night the prisoners were moved out to the new national jail that was under construction some twenty kilometers outside Tegucigalpa, with their shoelaces being used as makeshift handcuffs. The buses were stuck in the mud. There was not enough accommodation for the new arrivals at the new jail. Most spent the next three days without food and water in makeshift accommodation under the watchful eye of soldiers. Rioting broke out. No one knows how many died.

Fifteen kilometers outside Tegucigalpa, in the village of Loma Linda, vegetable farmer Don Elias Sanchez heard the sound of water rising at 6:30 in the morning. Don Elias's house lay at the foot of mountains on a bluff overlooking a small creek. Within three hours it was a pile of debris; 30 hectares of vegetables and 30 years of work had vanished in minutes.

But there was triumph as well as tragedy. Isabella Arriola, a 36-year-old teacher, was washed out to sea from the northern island of Utila. After four days of clinging to a piece of wood, she was rescued by a British warship, 120 kilometers from land.

Outside Tegucigalpa, in the interior of Honduras, the damage was fierce but localized – depending on Mitch's caprices. La Libertad in the north was devastated. One third of the town of Choluteca in the south was wiped out. In the low-lying river plains of Mosquitia, on the north Atlantic coast, the rivers rose 15 feet. But throughout, the fact remained that while the storm

itself could not have been prevented, there was nothing divine – or devilish – about its impact. Around Tegucigalpa, it looked as if giant claws had gouged at the mountains. This was one of many signs that Mitch was not a natural disaster.

Misusing the Land

The war in El Salvador was fought over the unequal ownership of land. But Mitch latched onto something more deadly in Honduras – the misuse of land.

No one knows exactly how many landslides occurred in Honduras during Mitch, but several estimates put the figure at more than 1 million. How and why had the slopes of this mountainous country been stripped so bare?

As in so many Latin countries, it starts with deforestation and slash and burn agriculture. So much forest was burned in Mexico in 1998, the year of Mitch, that the smoke forced schools to close in Texas. Like their Mexican counterparts, the small farmers of Honduras believe that slash and burn enriches the soil, and without the money to buy fertilizer, they have little incentive to believe otherwise. In fact, says Ian Cherrett, an official at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Honduras, a recent FAO study has found that each hectare of land loses \$400 worth of nutrients through burning, and that the soil needs three seasons to recover.

It is rarely allowed the respite. Instead, after one or two seasons of slash and burn the soil is too exhausted for agriculture and is left for cattle grazing. The same FAO study found a ratio of 1.2 cattle to each hectare of ranch land in Honduras – incredibly unproductive.

There is enormous pressure for these destructive practices to continue. Driven to export, if only to keep up with debt repayments that now exceed \$600 million a year, Honduras has become a source of exotic food for the tables and factories of North America, producing shrimp, melons, bananas, and coffee. But intensive monoculture also exhausts the soil and requires ever-increasing amounts of fertilizer to sustain productivity.

This was one reason why the country's cotton industry collapsed completely. It could eventually spell ruin for what remains of the banana industry, long one of the mainstays of the Honduran economy. As of the year 2000 AD, the European Union (EU) will import no more bananas grown with the help of pesticide, for health reasons.

Yet as each industry inevitably declines, it is replaced by another, equally damaging. Shrimp farms are destroying the mangroves at an alarming rate. Hoping to seize a burgeoning market, Honduras has become the region's major producer of African palm oil. This, too, requires intensive farming and is ruinous on the environment.

The country's tropical forests are treated with same disdain. Honduras is blessed with natural forest in abundance. But precisely because it is natural – and so not worked on and managed – hardwood like mahogany is sold at a fraction of its real value. Corruption and cronyism contribute.

A law to provide incentives to preserve forest has been stuck in the parliament for several years because it would require the state forestry commission (COHDEFOR) to contribute 20 percent of the cost of preservation. This is vigorously opposed by COHDEFOR, one of the country's most corrupt parastatals. COHDEFOR has been given a target of 600,000 manzanas of forest to cut annually, but, according to one expert, its officials are permitting the destruction of nearer 1 million manzanas.

In 1997 the government created a national park, named Cerro Azul Meambar, in the departments of Cortes and Comayagua. The park includes one of the lushest rainforests in Honduras, and is supposed to be protected. But there is pressure from logging interests that exploited the forest before it was declared a park, and appear to be surreptitiously continuing. One of the companies involved is closely linked to the president of the Honduran Supreme Court.

This ruinous misuse of land and natural resources make Honduras considerably more vulnerable to flash floods like those caused by Mitch. In addition to wasting a precious asset, commercial logging takes down the broad-leaf trees with thick roots, which bind the topsoil and prevent erosion.

High above the farm of Don Elias Sanchez, at Loma Linda outside Tegucigalpa, 25 farmers grew vegetables for the capital on slopes that were long ago cleared of trees. Their plots offered no resistance to the rains that poured down the slopes. They had constructed no terraces, and done little by way of irrigation. There was nothing to stop three rivers from joining into one. By the time the water reached the valley below, it had enough force to obliterate Don Elias' entire farm.

Land Ownership

Honduras has done more to address disparities in land-holding than its immediate neighbors. A 1936 law allowed any family with more than 20 hectares of land to claim ownership, creating a number of medium-size farms.

The pressure for cultivable land prompted a burst of redistribution in the 1970s. The goal was to distribute 600,000 hectares between 120,000 landless families. It didn't quite work out as planned – only 290,000 hectares of land was shared out. But by the end of the 1970s, many thousands of Hondurans were no longer landless. Land was expropriated from the powerful foreign banana companies, which were allowed to lease land for plantation but not own it outright or use it for other purposes.

Land reforms came to a quick halt in the mid-1980s. Under pressure from banks (and the US Agency for International Development) Honduras put the brakes on land distribution, and switched to privatization and "modernization." Instead of a natural asset that ensured the country's food security and held together the rural economy, land came to be viewed as a marketable commodity.

The backlash was swift. Hundreds of thousands of Hondurans who were waiting in line for land found themselves suddenly blocked from acquiring land, while banks and companies were freed from restrictions. They seized the opportunity to buy up land at prices that were low by their

terms, but prohibitive to the small farming cooperatives that had benefited from the reforms. The process of concentration began again.

This culminated in a controversial 1992 law known as the Modernisation of Agriculture law. The goal was to open up land for exploitation by companies, on the argument that they were efficient producers and would produce jobs. But according to Trinidad Membreno, a leader of COCOCH, the largest rural association in Honduras, it has had the reverse effect. Huge amounts of land have been opened up – usually at the expense of forests – but very little has gone to small farmers and 150,000 Hondurans remain without any land. Many make their way to Tegucigalpa. Technical advice and extension services gravitate towards those farmers with money, who are most likely to turn a profit and repay loans.

The banana industry showed clearly the bind facing Honduras as a result of its dependence on agro-exports. On the one hand, the industry employs 100,000 directly and perhaps the same again in related services. On the other hand, Honduran bananas face competition from other exporters (notably Ecuador), from health restrictions placed on banana imports by the EU, and from a long-running banana war between the EU and the US. All this threatens Honduras' export niche. In addition, banana production is not helping the environment.

Perhaps aware that the writing was on the wall, the banana companies have gradually reduced production and looked to diversify into other products (notably African palm). Exports of bananas from Honduras had fallen from around 17 million boxes ten years ago, to 6 million last year. The once-powerful banana unions found themselves losing members and influence.

As workers were laid off they looked in vain for other work. Thwarted, they joined the growing exodus of young Hondurans that made their way to the capital. By the time of Mitch, 184 settlements clung to the slopes surrounding Tegucigalpa. In addition to being highly vulnerable to floods and landslides, many were also crime-ridden and extremely dangerous. Trocaire, an Irish relief agency, pulled out of three shortly before Mitch. "They were hell-holes," says Sally O'Neill of Trocaire succinctly.

Most of the land occupied by the settlements is owned by the municipality of Tegucigalpa, which has rented out more and more public land to banks and companies, to cover its debts. This gives the companies a legal, if not a moral, claim to its use. But the law also allows public land to be used – and hence built on – if it is lying vacant.

High above the city, the land at El Mogote was a typical example. The rich Lopez family enjoyed the right of usufruct, but had not built on the land. By the time of Mitch, the land was being eyed by a bank, La Constancia, and a large constructive company, CONPLAN. El Mogote looked forlorn and empty, but rows of new houses were being built lower down the mountain for another settlement. In the land-hungry capital of Honduras, this was the equivalent of a choice spot. There was certainly a quick buck to be made.

The Regional and International Dimension

However serious, the problems that faced Honduras when Mitch struck were far from the worst in Central America. Throughout the region, forests were coming down, soil was being lost in huge quantities, and watersheds were drying up.

El Salvador faces a particularly acute water crisis. As the capital San Salvador has sprawled out, it has drawn on ever-increasing amounts of water and electricity from the country's sole remaining source, the river Lempa. The Lempa has a special place in El Salvador's history. It was the scene of an infamous massacre in the early 1980s, when refugees tried to cross into Honduras.

The Lempa is also dubbed "the Nile of El Salvador." But a good 60 percent of the Lempa river water originates in Honduras, which means that any solution to El Salvador's water crisis has to involve Honduras. El Salvador has also chosen to reduce its investment in agriculture for industry, assuming that Honduras would feed Salvadorans as well as Hondurans. The rural crisis in Honduras has major repercussions for the entire region.

Migration, too, was creating tensions within the region and between the region and the United States. According to Catholic Relief Services (CRS), some 20,000 Hondurans tried to make the trip north in 1998, through Guatemala and Mexico, only to be caught and deported. But because of the land pressure back in Honduras, many had no home to return to. Most turned around and tried again.

Who was to blame for this complex crisis – Foreign aid donors? The government of Honduras? The international economic system? The answer is a mixture of all three. By the time of Mitch, Honduras was locked into a disastrous cycle.

On the one hand, there was the debt burden. Honduras owes roughly \$4 billion in debt, almost all of it to multilateral banks like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and InterAmerican Development Bank. The cost of servicing this debt, in terms of interest and repayments, runs at over \$600 million annually. The view of the banks had always been that debt was an acceptable quid pro quo for economic development, and that Honduras was well placed to deal with the repayments. Helped by its success with palm oil, the country's exports were in good shape. Economic growth was projected to rise by six percent in 1998.

But even before Mitch, a growing number of critics – in the government as well as the nongovernmental community – argued that this made no sense at all. According to one Honduran NGO (FOSDEH), Honduras pays out \$5.81 on every dollar of aid it receives.

A hefty chunk of this goes to repay \$96 million that Honduras borrowed in the 1970s to build a dam at El Cayon for the purpose of producing electricity. The dam came on stream in 1978. Twenty years later, the debt has risen to \$246 million and accounts for one sixth of the country's entire debt. At the current rate, it will not be repaid until the year 2046 AD. As for the actual system of power generation, it was designed for the 1970s and requires huge amounts of water that are no longer available. During a drought in 1994, it was forced to close down. Even today, cuts in power production of 12 hours or more are not uncommon.

In a larger sense, Honduras' debt has forced the country to export more and more in order to meet repayments – regardless of the damage to the environment, the urban drift, and the migration north. Instead of imposing restraint, the bankers and donors were turning the screw. On the eve of Mitch, the World Bank and IMF were visiting Honduras to assess the country's debts, and prepare for a new "structural adjustment" loan – one that would insist on further opening the country's economy to imports, more privatization, a reduced deficit, and sustained economic growth. And the payback for Honduras? More debt.

Yet such folly cannot be blamed solely on the legions of foreign bankers, donors, investors, and advisers who have prodded Honduras down the path to destruction. Nor can it be blamed solely on globalization, and the interdependent, interlocking nature of the world economy.

Successive governments in Honduras have also contributed by succumbing to corruption and lethargy. Until the 1990s, there was no "transparency" in government, no real political opposition, and no checks and curbs coming from civil society. Although "democratic" in the sense of having an elected president, Honduras' political system was dominated by the executive to an unhealthy extent.

The lack of a confident, functioning civil society is one of the most noticeable aspects of Honduran history prior to the 1990s. Outside of the labor unions, which were strong, an attitude of resignation and dependency was bred in the average Honduran. So foreign is the notion of "accountability" that the word does not even exist in Spanish.

As we unpeel the different layers of the crisis that was waiting to strike Honduras in late 1998, we come eventually to global warming. Some remain skeptical that the earth's climate is currently in a cycle of warming, that humans are responsible, and that the results will necessarily be harmful.

Mitch should cause them to think again. When the hurricane dipped south towards Honduras last October, the water off the coast was an estimated four degrees warmer than normal – greatly increasing the amount of rain generated by the storm. Part of this was El Nino, but part was probably due to global warming. This warm area to the north in turn helped to draw up a storm system from the south (la convergencia) with the result that the strongest rain fell on the southern coast, with devastating results. Indirectly, the whole world was responsible for Mitch.

Mitch Pounces

Honduras was a disaster waiting to happen. Mitch took gleeful advantage.

CEPAL, the Economic Commission for Central America, put the number of dead at 8,000 and the missing at 11,000. This squared with the estimates of relief agencies. Trocaire had recorded 734 deaths by November 6 in its project areas. According to CEPAL, the damage to infrastructure – excluding homes – was put at \$4.2 billion. Two hundred thousand houses were destroyed in Honduras alone; 22 kilometers of bridges were damaged.

Trinidad Membreno, from the coordinating council of peasant organizations of Honduras (COCOCH) estimates that 32 percent of the country's farmers suffered losses, and that 39 percent of the country's main crops were damaged; 109 factories were forced to close, and 26,488 workers were laid off.

Situated on exposed and low-lying ground, the banana plantations were devastated. According to one estimate, the export of bananas fell from an annual level of six million boxes, to less than 250,000: 8,000 workers were laid off, 3,600 of them women. It was further proof of the extreme vulnerability of the country's main export crop. Three quarters of the country's melon farms were damaged, and shrimp harvesting halted. The areas worst hit were the river plains of La Sula, Choluteca, and Mosquitia, and mountain valleys like Tegucigalpa.

Mitch was less discriminating than most natural disasters, but inevitably, its impact was felt most directly by the poor. Trocaire supports 62 projects in poor areas: 29 were directly affected by Mitch.

In time, the impact would also be felt far beyond the borders of Honduras, adding to the pressure to migrate. Desperate at the loss of their homes or farms to Mitch, thousands of Hondurans left for the north, in the hope of finding work in the United States.

Father Ademar Barilli, a missionary who runs a house for migrants in the Guatemalan town of Tucun Uman, noticed a sharp increase in Honduran migrants who came through, seeking help. Eighty-three percent of the 1,291 migrants in January were from Honduras, compared to 65 percent a year earlier. One of them, Joel, had been farming on rented land in Copan, Honduras when Mitch struck. When the hurricane wiped out his crop, it also wiped out any hopes he had of repaying the 30,000 lempira (\$2,000) mortgage.

Forced from his land, Joel saw no alternative but to accompany his cousin Elgar on the journey north. He got as far as the Mexican town of Tapachula, but no further. Early one morning in February, the two young men tried to climb on to the moving train that would take them north. Joel fell under the wheels, which took off his right leg. Yet, as he told *On the Record* in an interview in Tapachula, there had been nothing for him back home in Honduras.

How serious does this damage look six months later? The economy certainly suffered – the World Bank predicts a growth rate of minus three percent, from plus six percent in 1998. But the damage should be temporary, and the agricultural losses manageable, predicts one official at the World Bank. The private sector does not appear to have suffered as badly as was feared.

This interpretation could prove decisive at the upcoming meeting in Stockholm, Sweden and may well kill any hopes of a deal on Honduras' debt. The World Bank has even concluded that Honduras fails to qualify for the joint Bank-IMF "HIPC" initiative, which provides relief for heavily indebted poor countries if they agree to submit to economic restructuring. If the Bank and other donors succeed in getting this traditional approach back on track, it will not address the distortions noted above and will inevitably leave most Hondurans marginalized and vulnerable to the next disaster.

Outside the region, Mitch is fast becoming a bad memory, overtaken by other international crises. But this is not the way it looks in Honduras, with the 1999 rains starting to fall, and the last six months frittered away.

Action Alert: Carlos Coc Rax, Activist in Land Issues, Disappears in Guatemala

The Centro para Accion Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH) and the Asociacion Pro-Desarrollo de Pueblo Maya Q'eqchi' de El Estor, report the disappearance of Carlos Coc Rax, leader in the Santa Rosa Balandra community in El Estor. Coc Rax is a member of the board of this campesino association.

Coc Rax disappeared on April 21 after returning to El Estor after travelling to Guatemala City where he was working on resolving land conflicts involving ten rural communities. He was seen for the last time by his brother, Javier Coc Rax, at 7:30 p.m. near the municipal dock, where he stated that he was travelling to his village that same night in a boat that belongs to the "Las Casas" ranch.

The El Estor area has a long history of land conflicts involving peasant indigenous communities, marked by large landowners usurping national and communal lands, illegal and violent evictions, and threats and intimidations to the communities' defenders.

Within this context, in the last months, Coc Rax had received death threats from rancher, Waldemar Lorenzana, as a consequence of the land conflicts between the Santa Rosa Balandra community and a ranch owned by Lorenzana.

Coc Rax's family fears for his life and physical safety, and although the disappearance has been reported, until now, more than nine days later, authorities in El Estor and the Izabal department have not so much as conducted a search.

CALDH and the Asociacion Pro-Desarrollo del Pueblo Maya Q'eqchi' de El Estor demand: That the Public Ministry and the Civil National Police urgently investigate the whereabouts of Carlos Coc Rax; and that the Justice Department authorize all necessary operatives in order to expedite the investigation required by the case.

Please Write to:

1) President of the Republic of Guatemala: S.E. Alvaro Arzu Irigoyen Presidente de la Republica de Guatemala Palacio Nacional 6a Calle y 7a Avenida, Zona 1 Ciudad de Guatemala, GUATEMALA Telegrams: Presidente, Guatemala, Guatemala Faxes: +011 502 221 4537 / 230 1508 Mail to: / Mail to: Salutation: Excelentisimo Sr. Presidente / Dear President

2) Attorney General: Lic. Adolfo Gonzalez Rodas Fiscal General de la Republica Ministerio Publico 6a Avenida 3-11, Zona 4 Ciudad de Guatemala , GUATEMALA Telegrams: Fiscal General, Guatemala, Guatemala Faxes: +011 502 362 7223 Salutation: Senor Fiscal / Dear Attorney General

3) Procurator General: Lic. Carlos Garcia Regas, Procurador General de la Nacion Procuraduria General de la Nacion, 15 Avenida 9-69, Zona 13 Guatemala, GUATEMALA Telegrams: Procurador General, Guatemala, Guatemala Faxes: +011 502 334 8465 Salutation: Senor Procurador / Dear Attorney General

Copies to:

Daily Newspaper: Diario Prensa Libre 13 Calle 9-31 Zona 1 Guatemala, GUATEMALA Faxes: +011 502 251 8768 Mail to: Guatemala City, April 30, 1999.

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Latino Organizations Express Frustration at Mitch Aid Deadlock in US Congress, Plan Protest

Hurricanes Mitch and Georges ravaged the nations of Central America and the Caribbean seven months ago. However, Congress is only now acting on the bill that provides for emergency funding to the region. Some in Congress are pushing for offsetting funds to respond to the emergency in Central America but are not doing so for similar operations in Kosovo. The Latino organizations in Washington, DC believe this position is discriminatory, inconsistent and raises serious questions about the motivations in Congress for pursuing such policies. They will be sponsoring a meeting with several notable Hispanic leaders at the United States Congress, on Wednesday May 12 at 12:30 p.m. at the House Triangle.

Attending and Presenting: Congresswoman Roybal-Allard, Congressman Menendez, and Congresswoman Sanchez (confirmed) . Numerous other House and Senate members are invited. . Arturo Vargas, Chair, National Hispanic Leadership Agenda. Sponsoring Organizations: . National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA) . National Association of Latino Appointed and Elected Officials (NALEO) . National Council of La Raza (NCLR) . Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC).

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In the next issue: Paralysis and Panic - The Government's Response