



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

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From the AP Editorial Desk

When 'On the Record' spoke to Don Elias Sanchez, in March, he was standing in the ruins of his farm at Loma Linda, outside Tegucigalpa. It had been completely washed away in two terrifying hours on the morning of October 29, and the 70 year-old farmer had every reason to be bitter. After all, his ordeal was partly due to his competitors, growing vegetables high up on the mountain slopes. They had made little effort to prevent soil erosion by building terraces, or inter-planting coffee trees among the vegetables. This indifference had cost themselves and Don Elias dearly.

But he was not despondent. Instead, bursting with pride, he showed us around the prefabricated house he had put up in the former parking lot. He then took us on a tour of the fifteen varieties of vegetables he was growing on just half an acre. Small terraces had been carved into the side of the hills, held up by recycled tires and fed by long hoses from the river. Already Don Elias does a brisk trade, selling to neighbors and small businesses from Tegucigalpa. We marveled at his fortitude and resilience, but he brushed it off. "What else can I do," he asked. "Life must go on."

In stark contrast to the initiative and perseverance of Hondurans, the government has performed less credibly. In the following issues, we look at the way the government of Honduras has responded. One striking feature has been the general reluctance to involve civil society.

Paralysis and Panic – The Government's Response

Carlos Flores, the president of Honduras, made quite a splash when he showed up in Washington on December 11, 1998 for the first meeting of the consultative group of donors formed to forge a response to Mitch. He was dressed casually in jeans and looked fatigued, as befitting the leader

of a country that had just lost thousands of its people to a hurricane. Nor was his language particularly diplomatic. Flores bluntly told his audience that his country's economy had been set back 20 years. Without massive help, it could not recover.

This was an impressive performance, but it had not been matched by the performance of his government in Honduras during the disaster itself. For the first few days, the government was completely paralyzed. It then muddled through for several weeks, during which five ministers resigned or were sacked. They included the respected Foreign Minister, who had urged competitive bidding for government contracts to rebuild. This was vetoed by President Flores, who wanted to retain sole decision-making power. The government of Tegucigalpa ground to a halt after the mayor was killed in a helicopter crash as he flew over the devastated capital.

Relief agencies that were gearing up to help were crippled by a complete lack of information during the first few critical days. This was largely the fault of the governmental early warning unit (COPECO) which had been created in 1974 by the Honduran military and was one of the civilian functions that still remained under military control in 1998.

The head of COPECO, Colonel Guillermo Pinel Calix, played an important role in the military's hunt for "leftists" during the 1980s. Although it had offices throughout the country, COPECO was more renowned for corruption than efficiency. It failed to channel information out during the crisis – for which it was severely criticized in a subsequent UN assessment. Despite this, COPECO received some expensive communications equipment, reportedly from the UN Development Programme UNDP.

Any information that did reach the government was tightly controlled and centralized, with President Flores personally taking the final decision on the release of particularly sensitive information. This left everyone in the dark about what was happening. Raquel Isaula, coordinator of the Sustainable Development Network (SDN-HON), which maintains a large electronic database for civil society, remembers receiving an irate call from the head of the association of municipalities. He complained vigorously that he had sent in all sorts of information to the government, but heard nothing in return, and that he had decided to turn to the SDN-HON's website for news.

The news blackout added to the sense of panic and fueled wild rumors. Casualty estimates veered from one extreme to the other. There was an outcry after the governor of Santa Barbara – one of the areas least hit – gave out a number of fatalities that ran into thousands and was quickly dismissed as exaggerated by the foreign media. At this, everyone lost confidence at the official statistics, which in turn led to a gross underestimate of the real damage.

By the middle of November, COPECO tried to take over the increasingly lucrative relief effort, but was rebuffed by aid donors. Instead, at their insistence, the aid was coordinated by nongovernmental agencies, while Honduran churches were given the task of finding emergency shelter for the 50,000 people made homeless.

Churches and schools were turned into "microalbergues" on the understanding that this would last no longer than three months. SDN-HON found itself distributing emergency bulletins by

email to agencies, and thus fulfilling the task that should have been done by COPECO. (This will be examined in the next issue). Civil society was rising to the occasion, and filling the gap left by government.

This is not to say that the relief effort went smoothly. Massive amounts of relief aid arrived at the port of Puerto Cortes, which quickly became clogged. The World Food Programme and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) had ready access to trucks, and were able to get their own food aid out of the central warehouses. But most other agencies were caught in a nightmarish muddle of blocked roads and non-existent transport. Six months later, much of the aid was still piled up at the port. It is not surprising that Honduras had lacked the means to handle such a vast amount of material. But, once again, it was not helped by the government's insistence on centralization.

Some of the harshest criticism of the government's handling of aid came from Leo Valladares, the human rights ombudsman. After the disaster, the Danish government signed a formal agreement with the Office of the Presidency and Valladares to fund, for a period of six months starting January 1, 1999, an investigation ("a social audit") of the handling of international aid.

Valladares' team of 12 investigators found 17 cases of apparent corruption, and documented serious abuses by government parastatals. His investigators found 1,028 containers at the port, yet it was not until February that the government appointed a director, Juan Bendeck, to clear the logjam. The team also found "large quantities" of dried milk, baby foods, and other emergency supplies in COPECO warehouses. The investigators found that a container of meat from the United States had been two months in the refrigerators of PRONDECA, the national meat-processing organization, awaiting a health certificate.

Out in the country, the main complaint was that food was not reaching the hungry. The World Food Programme (WFP) was criticized for not moving clothes out of its warehouse in the town of Choluteca – one of the worst hit regions in the entire country. The reason, says the ombudsman, was that the only employee was working half-time, and concentrating on food items.

Private relief agencies and churches performed much more effectively, according to the ombudsman. One Catholic parish in El Progreso (department of Yoro) was able to spend more than two million lempiras (\$139,000) on basic foodstuffs, which were then distributed among 3,800 families – all within two months.

But some private associations were also harshly criticized. The Rotary Club and Fundacion Maria both received "very large" amounts of money, but refused to reply to the Ombudsman's queries and "did not publish their transactions in any systematic form." The Fundacion is run by the first lady of Honduras and is more of a parastatal than NGO: the government encouraged international groups to use it to channel aid. In its own way, this was another example of the lack of transparency, which characterized Honduran society.

The "Albergues"

The 50,000 Hondurans who were displaced by Hurricane Mitch were treated like refugees, and placed in "microalbergues" (mainly converted schools).

This was always intended to be a temporary solution, but over 15 thousand were still homeless by February, four months after the disaster. On February 6, 1999, they were transferred to three large camps, known as "macroalbergues." The money came from the United Nations, the contract from the International Organisation of Migration (IOM).

'On the Record' visited one of the macroalbergues, known as Molina 2. Sloping up a hill outside the city center, surrounded by barbed wire, and with suspicious security guards manning the gate, it had all the hallmarks of a refugee camp. Inside, the inhabitants had few good things to say about their temporary accommodation. Perhaps this was inevitable, given the fact that six or more people were living in one room. But they also complained of shoddy construction, thoughtless positioning, and arrogant officials – all things that added salt to the wound.

Little thought, certainly, appeared to have gone into the positioning of the three macroalbergues. One, Trebol, was squeezed in between four major roads, making any movement in or out of the camp extremely hazardous. Incredibly, Molina 2 had been built on a slope and one roof came down in the first rain that fell. The rain collected in filthy trenches next to the huts.

One inhabitant who was visiting from the neighboring camp complained that the Honduran Red Cross, which ran the camps, allowed each family only 30 minutes of water a day. For Diana Velasquez, who had watched her house in La Soto disappear in a sea of mud during Mitch, this was altogether too much.

When we visited Molina, there were suggestions of serious tension between the Honduran Red Cross, which was trying to impose discipline, and other agencies, which were trying to encourage self-sufficiency among the inhabitants. ANDAR, an association that works with women, had been helping 18 of the families with small loans and Nora Sagatume of ANDAR said that the Red Cross has been heavy-handed in insisting on a 10 o'clock curfew and punishing any signs of undiscipline.

The week before we visited, one of the 18 women helped by ANDAR had complained of being beaten by her husband. This is not uncommon among the victims of Mitch given the stress, but the Red Cross had told her to enter a legal complaint against her husband, or leave the center. Faced with such a stark choice, she had chosen to remain with her husband. Like most of the women helped by ANDAR she was dependent on her husband's income and had no choice.

By this time, the patience of Hondurans with the victims of Mitch was beginning to wear thin, and the "damnificados" (damaged ones) were an object of dislike more than pity. They had overstayed their welcome, and become a reminder of the country's trauma.

They were also causing inconvenience. One school, Dionisia de Herrera, was still housing 83 families of damnificados in March. When it finally came time for them to leave, the students returned to find their classrooms piled high with garbage, the walls smeared with feces, and the windows broken. They protested publicly and angrily. Although some of their teachers bravely

offered to pay for the damage out of their salary, the damnificados were harshly criticized in the press for vandalism.

This turned into a general complaint against all the Mitch victims. Like beggars and squatters, they were being criminalized. But to officials at ANDAR the vandalism was hardly surprising. The displaced had been treated like miscreants from the start and given no incentive to take control of their lives. They had no sense of loyalty or ownership towards the temporary shelters. Certainly, the schoolchildren had been inconvenienced, and treated badly. But could this possibly compare with losing one's house and possessions in a torrent of mud?

El Mogote

One of the many mysteries surrounding Mitch is why so many "barrios" grew up around Tegucigalpa in exposed and dangerous locations – virtually inviting disaster. One barrio provides an answer. It is called El Mogote.

Vilna Inestrosa, her husband Jose Andres Baca, and their children were living in the barrio of La Soto when it was washed away by Mitch on the morning of October 29. They managed to purchase some plastic sheeting in the market, but spent the next day out in the open. Together with some 300 other families, they then went to the mayor's office, to seek help. Here, they say, they received permission from the mayor to move to a spot known as El Mogote, which lies way up on the hillsides overlooking Tegucigalpa.

El Mogote was empty at the time. The land was rented by the Lopez family, which owned a summer house nearby. But unknown to the damnificados, the land was also being eyed by a bank (La Constancia) and large construction company, CONPLAN. They were talking to the Lopez family about a purchase even as Vilna and Jose were making their arduous way up to El Mogote. Conditions up on the hillside were desperately inhospitable.

The displaced managed to attract the attention of a Spanish aid group, which provided housing material. A Taiwanese agency brought food and put up a small warehouse. Little by little, the pace of aid accelerated, as relief agencies began to realize that the families of El Mogote were a determined bunch, likely to put any aid to good use. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) gave clothes. Trocaire provided food. The Center for Women's Rights (CDM), based in Tegucigalpa, helped to channel emergency aid from the European Union and Dutch government.

El Mogote was beginning to assume the feel of a small community – in the words of Jose "we were beginning to live again." The families elected a "junta directiva" (committee of leaders). Then, on February 15, they had a nasty shock. A letter arrived from CONPLAN informing them that the land had been purchased, and that the families were forbidden from building at El Mogote. The bank and its partner had taken advantage of the chaos and paralysis that followed the death of Tegucigalpa's mayor and moved quickly to seal an agreement with the Lopez family. With the mayor dead, the families of El Mogote had no way of proving that they had indeed received permission to settle.

Still, no one expected what was to follow. On the morning of Wednesday, January 13 the Irish Foreign Minister visited El Mogote to congratulate the survivors on their resilience. Within half-an-hour of his departure, 80 police arrived carrying guns, and destroyed the settlement. They overturned the pots of beans that were cooking for lunch, broke water tanks that had been donated by UNICEF, trashed the houses, and beat anyone who tried to resist. One pregnant woman almost aborted. Another person was damaged in the eye.

When a local women's group (The Womens' Movement for Peace "Visitacion Padilla") did an inventory of the damage, they found that 17 houses had been destroyed, 11 burnt, and 54 food packages ruined. The damage came to just under 50,000 lempiras (\$3,472).

After the assault, 67 members of the El Mogote population sought psychiatric help and the families camped out in the open near El Mogote. The junta tried to meet with the new mayor (the former mayor's wife) on the day of their expulsion, but she refused. The next day, they succeeded in meeting with the director of the department that deals with municipal land. He promised that they could move to the other side of the hill, to a place called San Isidro. Some took what they could and moved. Others hovered near El Mogote, convinced that the government was "playing with them."

When we visited El Mogote, makeshift houses had against sprung up on the rock-strewn hillside. The Lopez holiday home was shuttered. Two large water tanks stood nearby, and the security guards were allowing the El Mogote families to draw water.

Of course, it was no solution. But the government's response had reminded everyone that it, too, had no answers when it came to the terrible pressure on land that had caused so much death and suffering during the storm. El Mogote is still public land, even if La Constancia and CONPLAN had won agreement to develop.

Making it Harder for the Small Farmers

The violence at El Mogote, and the paralysis of the government during Mitch, cast the government in Honduras – both local and national – in a very poor light. They also suggested a total inability to address the root causes of the disaster.

This was confirmed on December 18, 1998 when, in the wake of Mitch, the parliament approved a controversial series of laws aimed at jumpstarting production, particularly of agriculture. One law amended article 107 of the Honduran constitution, which prohibited foreigners from owning land within a distance of 40 kilometers from the coast. Another three measures effectively replaced the 1992 Modernisation of Agriculture Law (referred to in an earlier issue). One of these provided incentives for reforestation. Another lowered taxes on maize from 43 percent to one percent in an effort to reduce the cost of food. A third provides incentives for investors.

This package has been bitterly attacked by civil society. By opening up the coastal area to foreign ownership, the constitutional amendment seems aimed at attracting Spanish-owned hotel chains which have moved into Cuba and the Caribbean in a big way. But it could devastate one of Honduras's oldest indigenous cultures, the Garifunas, who live along the coast. Descended

from black slaves who escaped from British rule in the Caribbean, the Garifunas depend on fishing and planting beet roots. Because they practice communal ownership, most do not have written titles to the land that their families have occupied for centuries. Their culture could simply be swamped.

The other three measures were immediately seen as a threat to small farmers in Honduras. By reducing taxes on maize from 43% to 1%, the new law pushed cost of production below the sale price – thus adding to the pressure on small farmers. According to Trinidad Membreno, from the coordinating council of COCOCH (the organization of Honduran peasant organizations) small farmers were already at a severe disadvantage against wealthy competitors, because they did not enjoy the same access to credit, distribution, or markets.

Many peasant cooperatives had worked for 24 years without being able to gain a title to the land: now, at a stroke, private banks would be able to purchase land. All this, argued Membreno, could compound the damage done by Mitch and greatly weaken the country's food security.

The package was accepted without opposition in the Assembly, whereupon COCOCH and ANACH mounted a strong lobbying effort. Long and arduous negotiations with the private sector produced an agreement, which was initialed at the Congress on March 1, 1999 and effectively amounted to a modification of the new laws to make it easier for small farmers to receive credit. It has been hailed as a major victory for the small farmers – and for Honduran civil society. But many also agree that it does not go nearly far enough in reversing the trend towards the concentration of land – the very same trend that helped to make Mitch so devastating in the first place.

Muzzling the Human Rights Ombudsman

The most recent example of the government's indifference to sustainable development was its reaction to the critical findings of the human rights ombudsman, Leo Valladares. After Mitch, in pursuance of the Ombudsman's mandate to investigate abuses by public officials and private entities contracted by the government, Valladares set up a team to investigate complaints regarding the mishandling of aid. He identified 17 cases, and published his preliminary report in mid-March. A couple hours after the "Social Audit" report was released at a press conference, Valladares received a personal phone call from Carlos Flores angrily complaining that Valladares was discrediting his country and making it harder for Honduras to receive aid at Stockholm.

It was the first of many such intimidating attacks from the government. Two weeks later Flores wrote an editorial in La Tribuna, an influential newspaper that he owns. Honduras faced two types of crime, he wrote: one from muggers and common criminals, the other from people like the human rights ombudsman.

Much worse was to follow. Late at night on April 20, the Honduran Congress was reading aloud a lengthy proposed new penal code – a long, droning process, which almost emptied the chamber. Suddenly a motion was introduced to drastically reduce the mandate of the ombudsman and reduce his term in office from six years to four. The effect would be to gut the post

completely. In the first place, it would deny the ombudsman the opportunity to investigate cases of government corruption. In the second place, it would mean that his term coincided with that of the president, making him vulnerable to pressure from the powerful executive branch of government.

Out of the 168 deputies, only 68 were present; 39 voted for the motion, and 27 against. There were two abstentions. Several deputies protested angrily at this parliamentary maneuver, and one walked out of the chamber. But this was mild compared to the torrent of criticism from civil society. The Congress had confirmed all the worst suspicions, and not just about the handling of international aid in the wake of Mitch. By a decision involving only one quarter of the deputies, it had shredded the single most important curb on government excess and corruption.

As the protests mounted, at home and abroad, the government began to realize its mistake. The Attorney General (who had won his reputation by prosecuting the military over cases of disappearances) announced that the legality of the vote was questionable. Amnesty International issued an urgent action and a press release. The Nordic donors issued a public statement of concern. Thirty leaders from Central American civil society arrived in Tegucigalpa, met with deputies, and insisted that the measure be repealed.

On April 27, the measure was reversed, and Valladares' powers were reinstated. Two days later the Attorney General announced that charges of corruption would be laid against three individuals in connection with the ombudsman's report. They included a lieutenant in the army, and a distributor of United Nations food aid.

Civil society had won one of its most significant victories in Honduran history. But it had been a long and hard struggle getting to this point.

Honduran Government to Seek \$3.67 Billion at Stockholm, Drop Debt Demand

The government of Honduras will ask donors for \$3.67 billion from donors at the Stockholm conference, according to a summary of the government's proposals just released. Out of this, \$94.9 million would be targeted at "democratic participation." This would include the creation of a National Council for Ethnic Groups.

In its update on the disaster, the report says that 5,657 persons died in Honduras and 8,058 are considered legally missing; 12,272 were injured and 1.5 million sustained loss of property. The country lost \$3.8 billion – equivalent to 70 percent of the GDP.

The government request has been prepared by the special cabinet for National Reconstruction, which was established after the disaster. The total sum needed is \$3,993.9 million, says the report. Of this, \$318.4 million would be raised in Honduras itself, and the remainder would come from external funds: \$2.2 billion is sought in the form of grants, and \$1.47 billion in loans.

The bulk of the reconstruction funds would be spent on "economic reactivation." Of this, \$1.01 billion would go to infrastructure, \$761 million to agriculture, and \$42 million to forestry. Another \$1.24 billion is earmarked for "combating poverty and promoting human development."

The plan makes no mention of debt cancellation, preferring instead to hold out the cap for more aid in the form of loans as well as grants. This reflects the growing opposition to any debt cancellation from the multilateral banks, but it will probably anger the nongovernmental groups in the coalition Interforos. They continue to call for an alleviation of Honduras' debt burden, with the money going into a national fund for reconstruction that would be managed with input from civil society. Representatives from civil society visited the banks in Washington recently to argue the case, but received a noncommittal response.

Although it promises to benefit "the most affected sector of the population" the government plan looks very much like a restatement of the old economic strategy, based on loans and private investment. This will not please civil society. As Mauricio Diaz from Interforos argued at one press conference last month "we do not want to reconstruct illiteracy."

Nicaraguan Poll Finds Only 2 Percent Received Most of Their Relief Aid from Government Aid During Mitch

Out of 10,528 Nicaraguans questioned in a survey earlier this year, only two percent reported that they had received most of their aid from government sources during Mitch. In contrast, 23 percent received most help from an international organization, 21 percent from the local municipality, and 18 percent from an NGO.

The survey was conducted in 61 municipalities throughout Nicaragua on behalf of the coordinating group of 320 nongovernmental organizations that formed in Nicaragua on November 13, 1998 in the wake of Mitch. It was carried out by a team of 150 investigators over a period of ten weeks.

The aim of the survey, which was funded by the Ford Foundation and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), was to measure the contribution of civil society during the emergency.

Of those interviewed, two out of every three received some kind of aid, although 56 percent said that it only arrived after eight days. Community leaders said that the "most useful" type of aid was food, followed by evacuation and medicine. But food was also in shortest supply; 12 percent of those interviewed were receiving food for work at the time of the survey.

Overall, community leaders were more complimentary of the aid operation than ordinary people. Ninety-six percent said that they had been in contact with mayors. But there was also criticism at the government's distribution of housing material.

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In the Next Issue: Civil Society Emerges from the Cold War