



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

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From the AP Editorial Desk

The Clinton Administration has rejected an appeal that nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives join the American delegation to the forthcoming meeting of the consultative group in Stockholm.

The decision has surprised and angered activists, and strikes many as being totally at odds with US commitment to participation. One official from a prominent NGO in Washington described it as "a spit in the eye from a country that will lecture Central America about democratization."

Officials from USAID have said that there is insufficient time to prepare the legal basis for NGO participation, but if there was political support few doubt it would happen. USAID officials are also understood to be reluctant to have aid projects discussed by NGOs who might conceivably receive contracts as a result of decisions taken in Stockholm.

There are many precedents for NGOs participating on delegations at governmental meetings. The US routinely includes NGOs on its delegation to the annual session of the UN Human Rights Commission, which discusses highly confidential charges against governments.

There are fewer precedents, if any, for NGOs to participate in meetings of the "Paris club" groups of donors. But the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB), which is chairing the Stockholm meeting, has made much of the "higher NGO presence" in Stockholm.

For the NGOs themselves, participation at Stockholm has become something of a litmus test of the commitment of donors' towards the participation of civil society in reconstruction. Several other delegations, including Spain and Sweden, are planning to include NGO representatives.

Meanwhile, plans are moving ahead for the NGO forum meeting, which will take place on Sunday and Monday, prior to the donor discussions.

Some 100 individuals are also expected to meet on Monday with representatives from the World Bank, IDB, and UN Development Programme (UNDP). The Swedish and American aid agencies are also expected to attend.

Notice: 'On the Record' will be publishing from the Stockholm conference.

Feature of the Day: Early Warning in Nicaragua

From the Editorial Desk

After Honduras, Nicaragua was the country worst hit by Hurricane Mitch last October. On October 30, as many as 2,000 Nicaraguans died when two villages were swept away in a torrent of mud caused by Hurricane Mitch. It was the single worst loss of life in the entire region.

Now the cycle may be starting again. This year's rains have washed away temporary bridges, disturbed the planting season, and raised fears of another disaster. So traumatized were Nicaraguans by Mitch, that some are seeking counseling at the sound of raindrops on the roof.

Can these disasters be prevented? Nicaragua is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. It has an effective early warning agency in INETER (the Nicaraguan Institute for Territorial Studies) and a nation-wide system of civil defense. One UN assessment found that INETER had performed better than its counterparts from Honduras and El Salvador. Perhaps, suggested the UN, this was because INETER was run by civilians, as opposed to military.

During Mitch, timely information from INETER was able to save hundreds of lives. But the government was much less responsive. As DONNA VUKELICH reports in the following articles, early warning is of limited use when a government is not interested in acting on the information and mobilizing communities. Nor does it help those who are living in exposed villages on mountainsides that have been stripped of vegetation in the relentless search for fuel.

Temporary Bridges Tumble as the Rains Begin To Fall

Heavy rains have been falling on Nicaragua for the past two weeks, causing damage throughout the country especially in those areas still recovering from Hurricane Mitch.

Residents of 12 different neighborhoods in Managua are in constant danger of flooding, according to municipal authorities. The most serious problems are those neighborhoods along the shores of Lake Managua. Also affected are those near open drainage ditches that have not been properly constructed and are likely to overflow after normal rains.

In addition, a number of temporary bridges in the Leon-Chinandega region, most notably one over the Rio Negro, less than 10 kilometers from the Honduran border, were washed out last week. Several huge trailer trucks ended up in the river and traffic along the major highway (a key commercial route linking Nicaragua and Honduras) was blocked for hours.

The temporary bridges were installed after Hurricane Mitch ripped out the original ones last year. Posoltega is being called "defenseless" against the rains. Three of the municipality's communities had their communications with the rest of Nicaragua severed by last week's rains.

Along with the physical impact of the rain, which some specialists say could lead to another mudslide given the extremely precarious conditions on the slopes of the Casita volcano, the Posoltega survivors are dealing with tremendous psychological trauma. Many people are terrified of the very sound of the rain, and hundreds are still living as refugees in very makeshift housing.

- From Nicaragua Network Hotline, May 18, 1999; email: nicanet@igc.org

The Limitations of Early Warning

by Donna Vukelich

Less than a week into May, traffic ground to a halt on the Panamerican highway south of Managua after the temporary bridge at the Ochomogo River near Nandaime – the country's only route south to Costa Rica – gave way to one of the first rains of the season.

For more than 18 hours, vehicles were prevented from crossing, and people had no choice but to walk over a hastily improvised pedestrian bridge. One woman, who had balanced a huge box on her head as she crossed, breathed a sigh of relief after making it across. Then she shook her head. "What is this poor country going to do when the rains really start?"

More than six months have passed since the rains of Hurricane Mitch devastated much of the northern half of Nicaragua. In a country still traumatized by levels of precipitation never before seen in this century, the rainy season is once again setting in. It has sparked fear and concern among many, instead of the celebration that usually accompanies the first planting season.

Thousands of Nicaraguans still live as refugees, trying to make sense of the enormity of the disaster they managed to survive. At the same time, several government bodies are struggling to prepare for what the US weather service warns may well be a particularly severe hurricane season. Nicaragua could be caught short yet again. This is making Nicaraguans very nervous indeed.

Prone to Disaster

Claudio Gutierrez, long-time director of INETER (The Nicaraguan Institute for Territorial Studies) and a civil engineer by profession, notes that Nicaragua is extremely susceptible to a daunting range of natural disasters.

The country is located in one of the most seismically active areas in the world – Managua has twice been leveled by earthquakes in this century – and is also vulnerable to floods, tropical storms, and hurricanes. Since the earthquake in 1972, Nicaragua has suffered damage of US \$2.136 billion – an astonishing figure in a country where yearly exports were under US \$500 million for years. In this decade alone, Nicaragua has suffered two volcanic eruptions, a tsunami, several tropical storms, and one severe hurricane.

Floods are a virtual given for much of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, which historically has borne the brunt of the storm systems blowing in from the Caribbean. Hurricane Joan slammed directly into the Atlantic Coast city of Bluefields in October 1988; and Hurricane Cesar also wreaked havoc on the Atlantic Coast in 1996.

But Mitch went far beyond anything that had gone before – and was far worse than anyone could have imagined. First, Mitch was one of the century's strongest storms – reaching the highest category of intensity recorded in the International Scale of Hurricanes – and the single most destructive storm ever to hit Central America.

Secondly, the hurricane system was moving at a tortuously slow pace – some 5 km/h. This was so unusually slow for a storm system that Mitch seemed to have ground to a halt right over Honduras. In addition, Mitch made a significant change in course after it had been constituted as a tropical storm, one that virtually nobody was able to predict.

And, finally, the levels of precipitation were nothing less than mind-boggling. In the area around Posoltega 328 mm of rain fell in the entire month of October 1997; yet in the last ten days of October 1998, the same area received 1,116 mm. of rain.

Holes in the Civil Defense Safety Net

Two main institutions bear the burden of understanding, preventing, and preparing for natural disasters like Mitch. These are INETER, the Nicaraguan Institute for Territorial Studies, and the Civil Defense office. INETER has long been the center of technical expertise on natural disasters in Nicaragua. It is a technical entity that provides reports of weather changes to the presidential offices as well as to the National Civil Defense Office (which is part of the Nicaraguan Army.) Reports are also regularly sent to the media, but are not necessarily published in any consistent manner in the print media, though they often turn up as part of the weather reports on the national televised news programs. INETER is linked to a number of regional meteorological networks – most notably the hurricane center in Miami – and is also part of regional efforts to monitor ongoing seismic activity.

Like most institutions of government in Nicaragua, INETER and the Civil Defense Office suffer from a serious lack of resources after more than eight years of public spending cuts and draconian structural adjustment. Government departments lack the means to communicate and

collaborate with each other. Networks between the government and the population tend to be weaker still.

Over the last 15 years, the Civil Defense office in Nicaragua has been working to increase the professional expertise of its officials as well as its general level of preparedness. Precisely because so many people in Nicaragua live in areas that are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters, the National Civil Defense office has set up a countrywide system of civil defense committees. Of Nicaragua's 147 municipalities, 57 have been designated "priority areas" by the Civil Defense office because of their high level of risk.

Yet only 32 of those municipalities have functioning civil defense committees. Those civil defense committees include the mayor (as well as the regional governors on the Atlantic Coast), delegates from governmental ministries, church representatives and the like. One municipality that did not have a working committee is Posoltega, which had never before experienced serious problems due to floods or storms.

Nicaraguan journalist Roberto Fonseca dubbed the Civil Defense offices the "Cinderella" of governmental institutions, and quoted a high-level officer as saying: "If we want to implement a complete civil defense system, we would need to invest around \$10 million dollars." The office's annual budget is just under US\$300,000.

A shortage of funds has also taken a serious toll on the army, the police force, and the Red Cross. These are all institutions that play pivotal roles in the wake of natural disasters in other countries.

Death from the Mudslide

This lack of resources would be problematic in the best of times. It is tragic in times of natural disasters like Mitch.

Civil Defense and INETER were on alert from October 21 onwards, but nobody could have imagined the scope of the disaster that was to hit Nicaragua. INETER officials first became concerned in mid-October last year, when a series of several large tremors, accompanied by scores of smaller ones, left Nicaraguans on the Pacific side of the country feeling jittery and on edge.

On October 21 (ten years to the day that Hurricane Joan hit Bluefields and just days after the series of tremors) INETER reported the presence of tropical depression no. 13 in the Caribbean, some 600 km south of Jamaica.

On Friday, October 23, the three morning dailies reported that tropical storm Mitch was headed straight for the Atlantic Coast. That morning, the Civil Defense offices were crowded with journalists and government functionaries who were on hand for an official change in command. Col. Jose Garcia taking over from Col. Ramon Arnesto Soza who had been at the head of the office for several years. The dignitaries had to negotiate nearly a foot of water, because two days of rain had flooded the national offices. (Although he had officially been transferred out of Civil Defense, Soza worked around the clock during the hurricane.)

Within two days the storm had been upgraded to a hurricane. Though it was still quite a distance from Nicaragua, the regional civil defense committees in the autonomous regions of the Atlantic Coast (RAAN and RAAS) sprang into action. Because of intense rains in the RAAN and the RAAS, the national civil defense offices had carried out simulation exercises there in 1996.

Additionally, because the RAAN and RAAS have a long history of this kind of weather phenomenon, the communities there had a psychological edge over the rest of the country. They began to evacuate people. It is clear that early evacuation saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives in the small communities that dot the riverbanks in the RAAN.

As the final week in October wore on, the situation worsened progressively. Yet nobody was prepared for the call that came from Posoltega on the morning of October 31. Mayor Felicitas Zeledon made several calls – the first one to the President and the second to the civil defense office. What she reported seemed incredible.

The day before, part of the Casita volcano had simply slid away, burying the two small communities of El Porvenir and Rolando Rodriguez. They were obliterated by a wall of mud that slid down the mountain.

Zeledon initially reported some 1,000 deaths, but the final toll was estimated at nearly 2,000. Civil defense officers report the eerie feeling of flying over the volcano, and seeing a seemingly endless expanse of mud. Nothing that indicated any sign of the nearly 3,000 people who had lived in the two communities was visible.

Farther down the slopes, the scenes were horrifying. The media showed haunting photographs of Posoltega – vast expanses of mud, with scores of cruelly deformed bodies, trees and the wreckage from homes visible as the only reminders of life there. One little Nicaraguan boy told his mother that it looked "like the Titanic, but in mud."

The Government Drags its Feet

It had now been more than a full week since INETER alerts had been issued and the constant rainfall was creating havoc all over the country. Incredibly, however, President Aleman seemed to be dragging his feet. In fact, media reports indicate that he accused Felicitas Zeledon of being "alarmist," and of exaggerating the reports about the scope of the tragedy in her municipality.

The government never seized the initiative to respond more quickly or to request timely aid from abroad – helicopters could have saved scores of lives in the first days – and a state of emergency was never declared.

As is so often the case in Nicaragua, part of the problem was political. Many of the municipalities hardest hit are represented by FSLN (Sandinista) mayors (18 of 23 in the Leun-Chinandega area alone). The government allegedly did not want to give any farmers excuses for not paying off their loans. Because both Aleman and Vice-president Enrique Bolanos have had a contentious relationship with the Nicaraguan army, they are loath to cede a higher profile to the Civil Defense office.

In some cases, the painfully slow government response seems to have been caused by outright negligence. Moravian pastor Norman Bent, a ham radio enthusiast, had been following Mitch's path and was warning the many indigenous Miskito communities along the shores of the Coco river, which serves as the border between Nicaragua and Honduras in the country's north-central and northeastern regions.

Bent, who is part Miskito, says that "as a pastor, I was working to save my people." He accused the government of reacting in an unconscionably slow manner. "All these communities voted for Aleman," he said. "But they are isolated now, and nobody in the government cares." In the end, people spent days huddled together on the tops of small hills, waiting for help to come.

Political Commitment

INETER played a highly positive role during Mitch. It was extremely informative and technically top-notch. The Civil Defense and airforce (which plucked people off rooftops and treetops) also made essential contributions. But all seem to have fought a losing battle against government indifference.

If a government does not take measures beyond technical warnings and eleventh-hour rescue efforts, such tragedies will be almost impossible to avoid. When people live on the eroded, impoverished slopes of a volcano, or along the banks of a river on flood plains that are transformed into mud flats at least once or twice a decade, they are at risk on every day during the rainy season.

"Vulnerability – and this is true for any natural phenomenon – is the sum of a series of economic, social, environmental, and cultural conditions," said Claudio Gutierrez of INETER in a recent interview.

His comments make perfect sense, yet the powers that be in Nicaragua do not see the situation this way. The government dealt with Mitch in what was at best a patchwork fashion. It has made few efforts since then to take steps to avoid similar, albeit on a much smaller scale, kinds of damage during this year's tropical storm season.

Part of what the Nicaraguan government is taking to Stockholm as its overall package of requests is requests for increased funding for INETER. INETER's wish list includes both hydro-meteorological and geological projects.

That is crucial, but it is also vital that the Nicaraguan government accepts that natural disasters are a regular occurrence – and takes this far more seriously than it has to date. First and foremost, this means undertaking serious prevention programs that involve the population on a far greater scale. It must also include the relocation of those populations living on lands so precarious that their safety simply cannot be assured.

Gutierrez both recognizes and laments the fact that in Nicaragua it has been customary to "respond to the effects of disasters, rather than trying to prevent them." If disasters are dealt with only after the fact, the destruction they cause will surely increase in the future.

A former civil defense officer said, off the record, "The civil defense structures here can't do it alone. They need to get people out of the dangerous areas and then prepare them for what may come – floods, storms, anything. It can be done, but it would mean making the prevention of natural disasters a priority at the very highest levels."

A Disaster Foretold

Donna Vukelich points out that the impact of Hurricane Mitch was felt most heavily by poor Nicaraguans living on the margins. Their poverty, in turn, stripped the soil and the forests – and so made the land more vulnerable. This cycle must be broken, and poverty addressed, if future disasters are to be prevented.

Nicaragua's extreme vulnerability to natural disasters is inextricably linked to the model of agro-export production that has forever changed the country's face.

Half a century ago, the area in and around Leon and Chinandega was known for its oranges and small and medium-sized, generally prosperous, farms. Wholesale cotton production began in the early 1950s in a boom, lasting for several decades, that left the soil so saturated with chemicals that many women who nurse their children today are feeding them dangerously contaminated milk.

Most of the area is bleak, with the land fast approaching desert-like conditions. This zona seca (dry zone) is home to some of Nicaragua's poorest peasants.

Half a century ago, the north-central region of Las Segovias was chilly, mountainous and heavily forested. When General Augusto Sandino fought against US Marines in the late 1920s and early 1930s, his headquarters was in Las Segovias. It is said that the heavy forest cover made it hard for US planes to locate his troops.

Much of the area was clear-cut by US lumber companies that were offered attractive concessions under the Somoza dictatorship. Today, only a few small stands of pine remain.

In the last several years, the hills of Jalapa, once the breadbasket of Central America, have been turned over once again to tobacco production – to satisfy the renewed worldwide interest in cigars – with the attendant environment risks. Peasants eke out a living, their yearly incomes only a fraction of what a family needs to survive.

In fact, Nicaragua's regions of poverty, which would include Leon and Chinandega and Las Segovias in the northwest, correspond almost exactly to the country's most environmentally degraded areas.

Mapping Out the Danger Zones

A third, quite similar map, could have been drawn in November 1998. This time, it was the zones hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch, which corresponded to the zones of poverty and environmental destruction.

When people live on ecologically-fragile lands, and natural disasters are routine, tragedies are almost inevitable. For the impact of those disasters is to be even somewhat softened, a series of preventive measures need to be put into place.

In early May, a group of ecologists in Nicaragua said that a number of small communities located on the precarious slopes of volcanoes or mountains were living right in the path of potential mudslides or landslides. INETER has 47 separate areas currently registered as "danger zones." But technical experts have only been able to visit nine of those areas so far, and the visits were still at the level of preliminary studies.

The most vulnerable areas are also usually quite remote – making last-minute evacuations extremely difficult and often impossible. And, of course, not only are the actual lands dangerous, but people live on those lands in flimsy, inadequate housing.

David Rios, president of COBEN (the College of Nicaraguan Biologists and Ecologists), has made several visits to the Casita volcano area in recent weeks. He says that residents of the remaining communities located on the slopes of the volcano (there are at least five) should be evacuated and relocated to avoid any tragedies during this rainy season or in the coming years.

INETER geophysicist Wilfried Strauch calls the Casita volcano a "danger zone...with the very real possibility of a new mudslide," noting that in some areas the rocks "are as soft as soap."

Rehabilitation Rather than Relocation

The residents have told INETER that they want to leave, but are unable to because they have nowhere to go. "The people living on El Casita should be offered housing and employment," Rios says. "But the government hasn't dealt with them. They aren't there because they want to be there, they were forced up there during the cotton boom and now they're stuck there."

Rios said he is particularly concerned about several other areas, including the Mombacho volcano (near Granada and home to a cloud forest natural reserve), the Maderas volcano on Ometepe island, and the Musun mountain in Rio Blanco, in the dead center of Nicaragua.

INETER and the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure have begun construction of a massive retaining wall at El Casita. However, at least one environmental expert called it "folly" to undertake such an expensive effort – one that will likely not even be functional in the event of a major landslide. In any case, says the expert, the money being spent on the wall could well have been used to construct modest housing for area residents who need to be relocated.

While moving people off precarious lands is imperative, other preventive measures are of equal importance, according to David Rios. These should include programs to rehabilitate the land, plant forests, and assist peasants in basic land-use techniques.

Rios says that the entire northwestern volcanic chain of Los Maribios, which runs the length of the Chinandega-Leon region has been seriously deforested over the years, as has much of the

surrounding land. The situation is much the same throughout the country. Natural floodplains have been vastly expanded by the total devastation of any plant or tree cover during Mitch.

Even with only several serious rains to date during this season, a number of provisional bridges that went in after Mitch have been washed away. One of them, at Ochomogo, caused blocked traffic on the Pan-American Highway for some 18 hours. At the Rio Negro near Chinandega, several huge trailer trucks ended up in the river.

Much of the environmental devastation on the Pacific Coast stems from the cannibalization of the land by peasants. They are so poor that they have no other choice but to use every last bit of available soil and lumber. According to the Civil Society Coordinating Body for Emergency and Reconstruction (CCER), "even before Hurricane Mitch, the situation in the country was clearly fragile and unsustainable."

In other words, Mitch exacerbated, rather than created, the crisis currently facing the country. Given this, says ecologist Juan Carlos Martinez, a new vision of development is needed that is environmentally sustainable and allows citizens to participate in their nation's development from the very earliest age.

- **Donna Vukelich** is a writer who lives and works in Nicaragua.

Contacts for this issue

- The Swedish Foreign Ministry, Swedish NGO liaison group, and the IDB have all opened web pages on the Stockholm meeting:
- **IDB**
- For details of the Central American NGO participation, **contact SDN-HON**.

In the next issue: Nicaraguan Civil Society