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Deborah Tyroler

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Nicaragua: Hurricane Damage "incalculable"

by Deborah Tyroler

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According to statements by an FSLN official broadcast by Voz de Nicaragua on Oct. 26, damages resulting from Hurricane Joan's passage on Oct. 21-22 are "incalculable." Dionisio Marengo, chief of the FSLN public information department (DAP), said that the government had requested the assistance of foreign experts in obtaining detailed evaluations of the damage. (See also CAU 10/26/88.) After stating that livestock and crops in the central region had been virtually decimated, Marengo said the damage was comparable to the effects of 10 simultaneous earthquakes. After a tour of the area between Bluefields and Managua on Oct. 25, President Daniel Ortega said in a radio broadcast that the damage was "impossible to calculate." In the area known as Region 5 (Boaco and Chontales departments, and a part of Atlantico Sur), 22 towns, more than 20,000 homes, basic grain crops, livestock, pastureland, and forests were either destroyed or severely damaged. After his tour, Ortega dispatched an urgent appeal to the international community and to Nicaraguans not affected by the hurricane to assist the thousands of families who had lost their homes and crops, "left with only the clothes on their backs." The first official reports indicated a death toll of 60, more than 300,000 homeless, and the destruction or severe damage of all productive infrastructure in the affected area. On damage: Homes and other buildings in Bluefields and Corn Island have been declared total losses. Rama and a neighboring town, Esperanza, were reported 80% destroyed. Rama is a small port city on the confluence of the Escondido and Rama rivers. As of Oct. 26, both Rama and Esperanza were entirely flooded, the water level at 12 meters. Half the country's basic grain crop, and 40% of the banana crop were lost. The African palm plantations located north of Bluefields were 80% destroyed. All fishing vessels at Bluefields were seriously damaged. The deep-water port in progress at Bluefields was almost totally destroyed. The road to Rama was washed out in several places. Two of the country's biggest bridges spanning the Siquia river near Rama, and the Tuma river, east of Matagalpa were destroyed. On path of hurricane: Beginning on the morning of Oct. 19, the entire country was placed on alert status, and civil defense brigades were dispatched from Managua to Corn Island, Bluefields, and Rama to reinforce evacuation operations already underway. The country's emergency broadcasting system provided constant weather updates from Managua, and hurricane observation centers in Havana and Miami. The hurricane hit Corn Island with winds of 130 mph on the afternoon of Oct. 21, and arrived in Bluefields early the next morning. From there, Hurricane Joan cut a wide swath through central Nicaragua, arriving in Managua at about 10 p.m. Background on Bluefields and Corn Island: Bluefields, with a population of some 60,000 people, was settled by the British about 200 years ago. Its primarily wooden architecture set it apart from the Spanish-style buildings dominating the Pacific half of the country. It is the very heart, culturally and economically, of the predominantly black, English-speaking population in the southern Atlantic coastal region. Bluefields had a thriving fishing industry, many artisans, and a deep-water port was under construction. North of the city, near Kukra Hill, a pilot project of African palm was underway. Corn Island, the small tropical community off the coast at Bluefields, boasted a soap factory and other small-scale industries. (Basic data from AP, 10/26/88; 10/27/88 report by Donna Vukelich of the Instituto Historico Centroamericano, Georgetown University, Washington DC)

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