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Nicaragua: Report On Hurricane Disaster Relief Activities

by Deborah Tyroler

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Domestic disaster relief coordination, activities: Overall coordination of the relief effort rests with the National Emergency Committee which has created the National Hurricane Relief Committee. The Emergency Committee was formed in 1982 to provide relief to flood victims. The committee is comprised of representatives from international agencies in Nicaragua, including the UN, UNICEF, the International Red Cross, the Panamerican Health Organization, and the UN High Commission on Refugees; international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE and OXFAM; national NGOs, including Caritas, Protestant development agency CEPAD, the Nicaraguan Red Cross, international aid coordinator FACS, the UNAN and UPOLI universities, the Lions Club, Catholic development agency Juan XXIII, and the CST and ATC unions; and government institutions, such as the Ministry of Social Welfare, Civil Defense, the Sandinista Police, the Ministry of Foreign Cooperation and the Ministry of Health. According to CEPAD representative Milton Argello, the purpose of the committee is "to coordinate the aid, to know what resources are available, which organizations can respond to which particular need. But each organization continues to do its own work. Things are coordinated, but not centrally controlled." He stressed that the committee is "very pluralistic, the government has invited everyone to participate." The existing national committee bears little resemblance to a committee of the same name established after an earthquake destroyed downtown Managua in 1972. "A National Emergency Committee, set up under President Somoza's control and run by the National Guard, institutionalized the misappropriation of emergency relief. Realizing that relief supplies were being syphoned off and sold by the National Guard, Oxfam's field director talked Mrs. Somoza into giving permission to bypass the official distribution system. This meant waiting in the aircraft control tower for the right plane to be spotted, then careening onto the tarmac to get the trucks loaded before the National Guard arrived on the scene." (From D. Melrose, Nicaragua: The Threat of a Good Example, Oxfam Public Affairs Unit, Oxfam, Oxford, UK, 1985, pp. 6-7.) In 1988, Oxfam defends the government. In response to suggestions by US government officials that the Sandinistas cannot be trusted, James Dawson, Oxfam's director for overseas development, said: "We have worked with the government and would have no problem delivering aid through that channel." In Nicaragua, relief efforts began immediately with collections in the cities on the Pacific plain for clothes, goods and money. Christian base communities in Managua took responsibility for providing basic needs to many refugees. All Sandinista members of the National Assembly donated 30% of their pay for October and their monthly food subsidy of rice, beans and sugar. Several groups of workers donated a day's pay. Managua's rival baseball teams, the Boers and the Dantos, donated proceeds from one of their games, and students at the Central American University organized a benefit concert. As of Oct. 25, the Hurricane Relief Committee had raised 36 million cordobas and \$400 inside Nicaragua. Foreign disaster relief: The Nicaraguan government has requested that foreign donors channel their aid in a non-partisan way through established relief networks in Nicaragua, rather than selecting a special project. The purpose of the request is to assure that aid is distributed to the most needy areas. Next, President Daniel Ortega requested that the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLA) dispatch an economic team to prepare a survey of material damages. Government officials have stated that damage estimates thus far are incomplete, due in part to the

fact that communications with some areas have not yet been restored. As of Oct. 28, 2,052 tons of aid had been donated by European nations, Cuba, Mexico, and private groups in the US. The first Cuban plane carrying disaster relief arrived in Managua on the afternoon of Oct. 22. As of Nov. 1, Cuba had contributed 23 planeloads of diverse materials. As of Nov. 2, the Swedish government had donated \$3 million, and West Germany (government and churches), \$2 million. The USSR has promised 11,000 tons of rice and a boatload of supplies from the Soviet Red Cross. Planeloads of aid are expected or have arrived from a host of other countries, including Argentina, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, the European Economic Community, France, Britain, Italy, Panama, Spain, Switzerland and Uruguay. On Oct. 26, the East German government announced plans to send \$8 million worth of disaster relief, comprised of foodstuffs, medicines, clothing, construction materials, machinery and tools. The first planeload from US NGOs arrived on Oct. 26, provided by the Jubilee Partners from Tuscon, Arizona. The plane carried 30 tons of diverse materials. Jubilee Partners has also arranged to have a plane made available in Nicaragua to carry supplies from Managua to the most devastated regions mainly Bluefields and Region V. A group called Operation California has collected supplies ranging from medicine to motors, to be delivered by plane from Los Angeles to Managua on the morning of Nov. 5. As of Nov. 3, Oxfam and the Mennonite Church had organized a supplies airlift to be delivered direct to Bluefields. The plane will depart from New York, and make stops in Washington, DC, and Miami to pick up additional materials before landing in Bluefields. These are just some of the shipments already in the works. As of Nov. 2, Quest for Peace had dispatched seven containers of materials via ships, and continues a major collection effort throughout the US. Quest for Peace has launched a \$10 million fundraising drive, and Oxfam has been advertising for funds in major US daily newspapers. About 100 European NGOs are currently working to raise relief aid. The United Nations' World Food Program has donated 900 tons of food. NGO representatives in Nicaragua report that fundraising is difficult at present because 1988 has been a relatively busy year for natural disasters in the Third World. Wascar Lanzas, deputy director of ENABAS, the agency charged with distribution of basic foods, has said there is simply not enough aid to meet Nicaragua's basic food needs. US official response: The White House declared the US would not provide aid to Nicaragua, charging that the Sandinista government could not be trusted to use the assistance for disaster relief. Earlier in October, US aid for victims of the contra war was rejected by the Nicaraguan government and the National Assembly since it was part of a package designed to keep the contras in the field and fighting. President Ortega welcomed all hurricane relief aid, but emphasized that "the best and only humanitarian aid the United States could give us would be to stop its terrorist policies against Nicaragua." Shortly after Joan's passage, the Voice of America broadcast reports suggesting that the "international community" doubted that aid money would be spent wisely. Similar views have been aired by La Prensa and contra radio stations. As the first reports of the destruction on the Atlantic coast were coming in, the US State Department warned the Nicaraguan government not to use the state of emergency as an opportunity to commit human rights abuses. Richard Weldon, president of Operation California, told the Los Angeles Times that the US government was deliberately hindering private aid efforts. "The air force frequently transports, for free, assistance collected by charitable organizations in catastrophes," Weldon said, but "this time they told us the political instructions were: 'no aid.'" White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater expressed fears that Ortega's government would use aid funds against the contras. (Basic data from Prensa Latina, 10/28/88; 11/02/88 report by Nicaragua Network, Washington DC; 11/02/88 report by the Central American Historical Institute, Georgetown University, Washington DC)

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