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Transparency a Major Concern in Honduras in Aftermath of Hurricane Mitch

by LADB Staff

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, the Honduran government is taking extraordinary steps to prevent misuse of international assistance. At the same time, President Carlos Flores has come under fire for assuming special powers to direct reconstruction efforts. By late November, Honduras had received about US$72 million in relief supplies and US$5.5 million in cash donations. From the start of the international-relief drive, Flores has tried to assure donor countries that the aid would be handled with transparency and would go to the needy without pilfering or undue delay.

Among other steps, Flores has tried to remove government participation in the distribution of donated supplies by channeling them through the churches and nongovernmental organizations. Transparency is of special significance in Honduras because of its reputation as one of the world's most corrupt countries. Transparency International's (TI) latest annual report on corruption ranked Honduras second among the most corrupt countries in Latin America and third among the most corrupt in the world (see Noticen, 10/01/98).

Comptroller General Vera Rubi wants to prevent a repetition of the theft that took place after Hurricane Fifi in 1974, when civilian and military officials were accused of stealing relief donations. Attorney General Edmundo Orellana promised to prosecute offenders, and several ministries and government departments are policing aid distribution. To date, the government has reported only one case of official mishandling of relief aid. A member of the military was arrested for stealing donated food in the northern city of San Pedro Sula.

Officials have also reported complaints that aid has been slow to reach some areas hit by the storm but have described the problem as logistical. Some international relief agencies are supervising the distribution of their aid. And, according to the comptroller general, foreign auditing firms have been hired to verify the receipt, storage, and distribution of relief supplies. Red Cross accused of holding back supplies In at least one instance, aid has been deliberately held back.

The comptroller general said that a Nov. 16 audit of the Honduran Red Cross showed the organization had hoarded humanitarian supplies from international donors and had ignored a government order to send all medicines on hand to a central warehouse for distribution. An inspector said the Honduran Red Cross had begun receiving food, clothing, radios, rescue equipment, and other supplies on Nov. 9 but did not distribute them. "They kept it all to themselves and said they had nothing," said the inspector.

President Carlos Flores given emergency powers

On Nov. 18, the National Assembly gave the president special emergency powers to manage the crisis. It approved an administration proposal to allow the president direct control of all
reconstruction funds and authority to alter the budget to pay for reconstruction. The law also permits the government to contract for rebuilding roads and other infrastructure without competitive bidding and without seeking approval from the Assembly. To give the process transparency, the legislators set up a supervisory body to oversee the awarding of contracts. President Flores' promise to use these powers with transparency did little to end the criticism that the law opens the door to corruption. But Flores also announced he would allow international supervision of international aid.

Donor countries will be permitted to send technical personnel to participate directly in reconstruction projects as another effort to foster transparency. Comptroller General Rubi said the Agency for International Development (AID) will carry out its own audits of funds allocated for reconstruction. With centralized control over reconstruction through the emergency law, the Flores administration then negotiated a pact committing all parties to undertake reconstruction with all due transparency.

The pact was signed by Oscar Rodriguez, archbishop of Tegucigalpa and president of Transparency-Honduras, TI international director in Honduras Mario Rietti, and representatives from labor, campesino, and professional organizations. Rietti said the purpose of the pact was "to construct an island of integrity" in the public bidding on reconstruction contracts. A copy of the pact was sent to Enrique Iglesias, director of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which will meet Dec. 10-11 in Washington to consider funding for reconstruction projects.

Aside from transparency in managing aid, the pact recommends limiting congressional immunity to parliamentary matters instead of permitting its use to evade justice. It also recommends limits on expenditures by political parties and measures to expose official corruption. Meanwhile, sources in France accused the Honduran government of inflating the numbers of storm victims. Nicolas Poincare, correspondent for France Info and France Inter, said figures of dead and missing compiled by local authorities were significantly less than the 14,000 reported by the government.

After an investigation, the government suspended Gov. Lucila Esperanza Barahona de Castro of Santa Barbara department in northwestern Honduras while it verifies reports that it said came from her office. Barahona said she made no reports at all and did not know where the erroneous estimates came from. The government subsequently lowered the death count by 1,350. Poincare said UN and EU personal in Honduras reported similar exaggerations. Those officials are warning that continued misinformation on Honduras' needs could undermine confidence in the government and lead to reductions in aid. [Sources: Notimex, 11/21/98, 11/27/98, 11/29/98; Spanish news service EFE, 11/20/98, 11/27/98, 11/30/98; La Prensa (Honduras), Associated Press, 12/01/98]

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