What happened to the aid? Logistics of hurricane relief: Logistics of hurricane relief

by Paul Jeffrey in the February 17, 1999 issue

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

I looked outside while sipping coffee with Mara Los Santos in her home on the highway near La Lima. Banana fields that were ruined in November by Hurricane Mitch stretched into the distance, providing a dreary backdrop to the dozens of shacks hastily crafted from scavenged lumber and plastic. Children played soccer on half of the four-lane highway that Los Santos and her neighbors had seized for a living space as they waited for the mud to dry on what remained of their devastated houses.

Despite their predicament, Los Santos and her neighbors didn't seem like victims. They were simply too organized, too hopeful and too hospitable to evoke pity.

A secondhand yellow school bus from a local evangelical church started to plow down the small lane between the rows of shacks. The windows of the bus opened and the people inside, some of whom were obviously foreigners, began to throw out black garbage bags filled with clothing and food. People sprang from the shacks and began to fight over the bags. One woman stole a bag from some children and swatted at them when they fought to take it back. Inside the bus, which moved at a crawl, the foreigners took photographs of the aid distribution.

I pounded on the bus door until they let me in. The foreigners turned out to be Germans. One of them admitted that it was less than ideal to give aid this way, but they couldn't think of a better way to do it. When I asked him why they hadn't stopped to talk with the people, he simply stared at me.

Along the highway, Ezequiel Galo, one of the community's leaders, explained that the families were well organized, and that food donated by churches and other

organizations was distributed according to need. Galo shook his head at the behavior of the Germans. What can we do if they won't even talk with us? he asked. He said some people drive by at high speed and toss bags of used clothing from their car windows, putting the victims of Mitch in danger of being hit by the flying bags. They want to help, but they're afraid of us, Galo said. So they treat us like animals, added Los Santos.

Hurricane Mitch, which wrought unbelievable destruction in Central America, provoked an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy in other parts of the world. Moved by the images they saw on television, people from Seattle to Spain responded from their hearts. But not always with their brains.

Graphic evidence of that can be found along the quay at Puerto Cortes, the Honduran port closest to the U.S. and Europe. By early January more than 1,000 huge containers of relief supplies lay unclaimed on the docks, and ships had a hard time unloading new material for lack of dock space. The containers piled up because local relief groups couldn't afford to truck them to affected communities. The government finally seized most of the containers and distributed their contents to shelters.

Though few aid officials in Honduras or Nicaragua will say so on the record, they are weary of the logistical nightmare caused by the avalanche of donated material. Containers with food and clothes all mixed together require precious time to sort through. Tons of drinking water have been shipped to the region, but what many communities need is a decent filter to clean the water they have, or PVC pipe to rebuild their own potable water system. The used clothing is at times so pitifully ragged that it has to be discarded; even distributing good used clothing to disaster victims often does little to help their dignity at a time when self-esteem may be all they have left.

Right after the storm, relief material was needed and not available locally. Church World Service flew in food, medicine and tents for a church-based group in Tegucigalpa when those items were sorely needed, and most of the material was immediately transported by helicopters to the isolated villages. That the tents didn't have waterproof rainflys was a minor bother; the aid was timely and appropriate.

As the weeks went by and roads and ports opened up, however, relief officials preferred cash to containers. With cash they could get exactly what they needed

when they needed it. Yet relief agencies in the North pass on resources from a public that prefers to buy cans of beans at the local supermarket and put them in a box at the back of the church sanctuary--though the amount spent on buying and transporting one can would buy ten times as many beans in Honduras.

Relief agencies in the U.S. and Europe have their work cut out for them in educating constituents about the logistics of assisting disaster victims. If they simply turn down the can of beans, they risk alienating the faithful. Yet the faithful also need to know the truth. One man from my hometown in the U.S. wrote me by e-mail to proudly relate how his congregation had filled dozens of buckets with store-bought cleaning supplies, including air freshener, to ship off to the denomination's relief agency for hurricane victims. I wrote back asking what a rural peasant was going to do with air freshener in the middle of a muddy field after her adobe house had washed away. The man wrote back, annoyed with his church for playing him for a fool.

Responding to disasters in the Third World requires both generosity and discernment. Several Nicaraguan church leaders suggested the latter was lacking when the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) filled a U.S. Air Force military plane with 19 tons of food which were flown to Managua and turned over to the Nicaraguan government. While the shipment represented just a fraction of UMCOR's response to Mitch, it has proved the most controversial. It took place at a time when Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Alemán wouldn't allow churches to bring in aid; instead, Alemán's Liberal Party took charge of most aid distribution and the political advantages it brought.

Such blatant abuse led the government's own comptroller general, Agustín Jarquin, to accuse Alemán of political manipulation of hurricane aid. Miguel Mairena, a United Methodist missionary in Managua, said that in the face of the biggest disaster in Nicaraguan history, the government was playing politics rather than helping people. The government's response was more of a catastrophe than the hurricane.

Lloyd Rollins, UMCOR's disaster chief, admitted he didn't consult with any Nicaraguan church leaders before sending the food. We had no questions regarding the politics of it, he said; it was a question of delivering humanitarian aid and we did it.

Responding immediately to disasters in regions where corrupt politicians control access is admittedly more art than science. Being faithful to a humanitarian

mandate when people are dying of hunger will at times lead agencies to err on the side of providing whatever aid they can. Yet dialogue with church and secular partners on the ground can over time help shape more appropriate responses. Otherwise, relief from the outside will simply exacerbate crises.

Inside the countries affected by Hurricane Mitch, communities have responded in a variety of ways. As the waters began to recede, I visited some villages where people were waiting for someone from the outside to come solve their problems. Sooner or later one of the giant international aid agencies showed up to pass out food and clothes. In other villages, people began the process of reconstruction by depending on their own wits and the meager resources at hand.

When a nearby river flooded in the middle of the night, people in a small Honduran village called 12 de Febrero, located along the border with Nicaragua, fled their homes in the darkness, dragging their children through chest-deep water to higher ground. They also rescued a few wet bags of rice and corn. When the flood waters finally receded two weeks later, they could find no trace of many of their adobe and wood homes, and their fields were covered with up to two meters of mud. To make matters worse, landmines left over from the contra war in the 1980s had washed loose from nearby mountainsides, and villagers had to be careful where they stepped. One found an unexploded mine in her chicken coop. In Santa Catarina, the next village downriver, two people were killed on November 18 when a mine exploded as they planted watermelon seeds in the new silt.

Neither floods nor mines could deter the people of 12 de Febrero. They are accustomed to adversity. They obtained their land by seizing it from a wealthy landowner in 1972, and fought countless battles with soldiers and lawyers to keep it. Their crops of corn and watermelon never flourished, but they hung on tenaciously to the land, and they survived. In the weeks after Mitch, that same spirit prevailed. They pooled their resources and bought from a neighboring cooperative a new tract of land higher up from the river. There they began hammering together temporary homes, while at the same time planting several crops in the drying mud to see what, if anything, would grow. Much of this they did themselves before any outside agency made it through the lingering floodwaters and mud to see whether they had survived.

When I hiked across the new mudflats to visit 12 de Febrero, I was struck by the villagers' upbeat attitudes. I would have been devastated and depressed had

everything I owned been washed away in a few minutes. Yet despair is perhaps a privilege of class; the poor can't afford the luxury of losing hope. We had to struggle for the little we had before the hurricane, said Albertina Gunera. "Since Mitch destroyed our village, not much has changed. We remain poor, but we also remain determined to keep on struggling. That's the only way we'll survive."

Gunera's village has received assistance over the years from the Christian Commission for Development (CCD), a church-based agency providing education and organizational assistance. CCD focuses on how power is distributed, and it explores with rural people how they can change corrupt local and national structures. That's easier said than done; it requires the ability to listen to the poor as they define their own priorities. When done well, this approach fosters a feisty resilience that's manifested dramatically in times of crisis, when the poor simply refuse to be victims.

This is not to say that resources are not important. Given that government-to-government assistance tends not to filter down to the grass roots, church dollars and kronas, guilders and pounds will prove critical in rebuilding life in poor communities. Church members in the north should continue to display the generosity that characterized their initial response to the disaster. Yet such assistance shouldn't be thrown out the windows at the poor. There's still time to help the victims--and there's still an opportunity to listen to them.