

Battling Storms

Delivering water at Soto Cano air base.



U.S. Navy (Michael J. Tuemler)

Interagency Response to Hurricane Mitch

By MELINDA HOFSTETTER

One objective of the United States in the Western Hemisphere is minimizing the human cost of conflicts and natural disasters. This requires a capability for emergency response assessment to provide relief with the attendant objective, according to the Secretary of State, of decreasing “the need for U.S. disaster assistance through increased host government

disaster management.” These objectives require marshalling Federal agencies in conjunction with other national, multinational, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). But the success to this point is debatable. The humanitarian crisis in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 revealed that the ability of the Nation to respond to such complex contingencies remains deeply flawed.

Hurricane Mitch was the fourth most powerful Caribbean hurricane of the 20th century and the most devastating to hit Central America in 200

Major Melinda Hofstetter, USMC (Ret.), served on the faculty of the Joint Military Intelligence College and currently is associated with the Center for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance at Tulane University.



years. Sustained winds of 180 miles per hour killed 10,000 and devastated large sections of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua with the greatest devastation in Honduras and Nicaragua. Heavy rain caused flooding, mudslides, demolished infrastructure, and further loss of life. Local economies may take more than a decade to recover from \$3.5 billion in property damage and the displacement of two million people. Yet this scenario was not unforeseen. When U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) began a series of exercises known as *Fuerzas Aliadas* (Allied Forces) in 1996 at Joint Task Force B (JTF-B), Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, it posited a one-in-200-year hurricane hitting Central America.

First Responders

Foreign assistance began almost as the hurricane hit with over 40 countries offering relief. Mexico sent more than 400 soldiers and 28 transport helicopters, 12 cargo planes, 30

bulldozers, and two naval hospital ships. Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and others also sent equipment and personnel.

Many countries, including the United States, forgave debts while the World Bank pledged \$1 billion in no-interest loans. In addition, the Inter-American Development Bank reprogrammed loans to the region and approved new financing for Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.

Despite this major response, the flow of information was hampered because of mass chaos and general unpreparedness for the disaster. After the hurricane hit, SOUTHCOM gave the green light to JTF-B to put all aircraft in the air and exercise lifesaving measures by plucking people from rooftops and the water and moving them to safe havens. Because JTF-B had insufficient assets, U.S. Army South in

Panama was ordered to deploy to Honduras. Poor weather delayed flights until November 2–3, when CH-47s, C-130s, and C-27s moved in-country.

Because a standing JTF-B mission was support of disaster relief, there was an order on the shelf and preparations for execution started within hours, without a directive from the Joint Chiefs. No warning or execute orders came from SOUTHCOM, and preparations were ad hoc. Moreover, SOUTHCOM issued guidance for developing an exit strategy before forces began to be deployed.

This operation was named *Fuerte Apoyo* (Strong Support) and conducted in three phases:

- Phase I: emergency response (October 28–November 28)—lifesaving and delivering aid such as food, water, and medical supplies

- Phase II: rehabilitation (November 28–February 20)—repairing critical infrastructure and providing relief supplies so that countries could complete work on their own, and reestablishing national capabilities for health and welfare, an explicit objective of U.S. policy

- Phase III: restoration (February 20–September 1)—implementing the long-term effort to assist affected nations in restoring pre-hurricane conditions.

Interagency Coordination

Presidential Decision Directive 56 (PDD 56), the policy on complex contingency operations issued in May 1997, directs interagency teamwork, identifies responsibilities, specifies planning for coordinating all Federal agencies, and offers timely strategic guidance. Even though it calls for a cabinet-level executive committee to supervise participation, the Commander in Chief, Southern Command (CINCSOUTH), reportedly issued initial guidance alone. The lack of civilian direction reduced unity of effort. Moreover, the so-called CNN effect, with media coverage and phone calls from the public replacing doctrine and planning, appeared to drive the early U.S. response.

In November 1998, Presidential Determination (PD) 99-03 directed the drawdown of \$30 million in both goods and services from defense stocks under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. The politically-charged nature of

Transporting equipment from Puerto Cortes, Honduras.



U.S. Navy (Leland B. Corner)

the operation led to disjointed actions on the highest levels, which hampered decisionmaking. As a result, a task force was organized under the White House chief of staff and co-chaired by the National Security Council and the Office of Management and Budget. But the PDD 56 concept of coalescing agencies did not materialize because many members of the task force were unfamiliar with political-military plan-

without implementation of PDD 56, guidance was not transmitted to the operational level

ning. Lacking a plan, no intent was defined, no assets were identified, no endstate was established, and no agency responsibilities were settled. Moreover, without implementation of PDD 56, major policy and doctrinal-level issues were left unresolved, and guidance was not transmitted to the operational level. In fact, formal requests for forces were often ignored because the source of funding remained

uncertain. The consequence of inaction on the national level included delays in phase II support, lack of coordination in the field, wasted resources, and duplication of effort.

Crafting the Response

Why was PDD 56 not implemented? One might hypothesize that a Rwanda-era mentality had taken over. During the Rwandan crisis, the highest levels of the Government were still reeling from the Somalia debacle and preoccupied with developing a political-military plan for Iraq. At the time of Hurricane Mitch, the National Security Council was busy planning for Kosovo and Iraq once again.

The Agency for International Development (AID) is the normal interagency coordinator for such relief. Through the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and with the authority of the White House, it assumes the lead in organizing humanitarian assistance, assessing needs, and procuring supplies, services, and transportation. This office can also fund certain activities carried out by NGOs and U.N. agencies outside the continental

United States. For Federal agencies to get involved formally and financially in foreign relief, specific conditions must be met. For natural or manmade disasters and complex emergencies, OFDA must determine that lives are at risk and that the host nation cannot manage the crisis and will accept help. Funds may be accessed only after a declaration of disaster by the country involved and the U.S. ambassador or chief of mission, which may result in:

- deploying regional advisors
- using disaster assistance authority (an immediate \$25,000 in cash may be authorized)
- providing disaster relief commodities from OFDA stockpiles
- deploying an assessment team
- deploying OFDA disaster assistance response teams (DARTs)
- funding proposals from voluntary organizations, NGOs, international organizations (IOs), and U.N. agencies.

The magnitude of the Hurricane Mitch crisis called for a combination of these responses.

Both Central America and the Caribbean benefit from a well established OFDA program. An immediate advantage during the hurricane response lay in the solid host-nation relationships the office developed over years. During and between disasters it committed considerable resources to prevention, mitigation, and preparedness, including training and stockpiling supplies. It employs the military only as a last resort, primarily because of expense and the heavy maintenance package. In addition, U.S. forces deployed overseas may be distrusted. Finally, there is a military concern over being tied down. Because of the scope of Hurricane Mitch, DOD was approached by OFDA and became subordinated to the agency, a normal practice during disaster relief operations.

When it became apparent that the storm posed a tremendous danger, a strong response by civilian and military components was expected. OFDA had an ongoing relationship with the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and with

C-5 arriving at Soto Cano with building supplies.



Unloading pallets of rice at La Mesa, Honduras.



West Virginia Air National Guard (Mike Pitzer)

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SOUTHCOM, especially the command's logistics directorate.

Hurricane Mitch called for an even broader effort than the standard interagency relationships implied. As an OFDA official observed, "the disaster quickly exceeded our ability to coordinate." Consequently, a decision was made to assign liaison officers to U.S. military advisory groups in the countries affected and to SOUTHCOM headquarters. Beginning in late October, AID sent OFDA assessment teams to assist indigenous relief workers. Moreover, the dispatch of logisticians to liaise with the military advisory group in Nicaragua and the OFDA Central American headquarters in Costa Rica aided the flow of relief support.

Damage assessments were accomplished through the OFDA deployment of DARTs to each country affected by the hurricane. Four regional teams reported to Costa Rica. A team originally had been prepositioned in Belize where the storm threatened to strike initially, but after the hurricane switched course the team was sent to Guatemala and Costa Rica. A team from the United States traveled to Honduras. Besides assessment teams that went to Honduras daily, a group worked with ministries and the Emergency Operation Center in Tegucigalpa. The OFDA official at the center prioritized assessments and helped Hondurans get relief to hard hit areas. That same information was passed to JTF-B for helicopter support to carry assessment teams, food supplies, and relief items.

Regional Partnerships

The typical country team for such an operation consists of the ambassador, defense attaché, and military advisory group commander who play a major role. In Honduras the advisory group sent seven officers, three NCOs, and a number of civilians as liaisons to Honduran agencies, like the Standing Committee on Contingencies (COPECO), the equivalent of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Officers were also dispatched to the Honduran military operations center to determine what assets were arriving from abroad and where they were needed. The Navy program manager in the group worked with his counterparts to determine how to rescue victims along the coast and move food via waterways, as most roads were impassable.

Seebees moving dirt and gravel for relief efforts.



U.S. Navy (Michael J. Tuemler)

COPECO had offices on the national and regional levels as well as local emergency centers. But its personnel thought the hurricane would hit the north coast, where all the assets had been moved. Then the storm hit the capital and traveled south. The committee lacked authority to request

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what was needed from various ministries. It was understaffed and underfunded and suffered from poor facilities, communications, and maps. The telephone system was overwhelmed. These problems stalled relief efforts on the national level. With help from the advisory group, COPECO moved to quarters provided by a private engineering company with international phones, computers, copiers, and fax lines to emergency centers. This Honduran operations center, known as the National Commission for Emergencies (CONE), was subordinate to the ministry of government and justice.

The military advisory group worked with Honduran officials to determine relief priorities. An air tasking order was established to move supplies to the right places and in the right quantities. Daily meetings with host-nation officials reviewed available air and ground assets and the needs of individual districts, including food supplies. One result was the production of movement tables for the following 48 hours. JTF-B, AID, and OFDA formed a cell to receive calls for assistance and to coordinate with CONE members: ministries of health, transport, public works, and government, emergency centers, mayors, community leaders, and the military. Priorities were established based on available supplies, support personnel, helicopter capability, and distance to affected areas. CONE also hosted nightly briefings until its members were able to return to their own offices.

Despite the cell, the chaotic situation made planning integration difficult. The cell continued taking calls from the private and public sectors.

When CONE briefings ended, no consistent venue for sharing information existed. Exchange and response relied heavily on NGOs. In general, JTF-B coordinated with OFDA, which worked with NGOs on needs and damage assessment. Information was shared through after action reports. Pilots also provided data to the planning cell on landing sites, drop-off zones, resource validation, land and air accessibility, and disease hazards.

Host-nation agencies are vital despite institutional weaknesses. As noted by the report of the U.S. Army Center for Lessons Learned on Hurricane Mitch, the operation demonstrated that “integration of host nation military at every juncture . . . to create a common bond, improve situational awareness, and provide better all around security” is imperative.

Coordination and Training

Civil-military collaboration is vital in disasters. Yet lack of coordination, access, and unity of effort presented ongoing deficiencies in Honduras. Assessments were conducted by the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, U.S. Special Operations Command South, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army Community Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine groups, U.S. Air Force Rapid Engineer Deployable Heavy Operational Response Squadron, Army Chief of Staff Special Medical Advisor, nongovernmental organizations, and more. Accurate and timely assessments remain critical to shaping force structure, tailoring supplies to areas, prioritizing relief by country, driving planning considerations, and avoiding waste and duplication. Within OFDA, for example, there is a requirement for baseline standards of information and a protocol for emergencies.

There are surprisingly few unknowns in disasters. The fundamental characteristics are well understood. The imponderables involve location, extent of infrastructure damage, and casualties. When a region has qualified health institutions and defense establishments, the Armed Forces can successfully integrate with host nations. With integration comes a key consideration for mission completion, keeping lines of communication open, which falls

within the realm of nontraditional missions. As seen in this relief effort, with 19 countries providing support immediately, a unified front toward achieving common goals is indispensable.

After the hurricane, CINCSOUTH ordered that training with emergency operations centers be expanded through command and OFDA initiatives. There is ample opportunity for in-country, host-nation training to forge effective partnerships in disaster mitigation. But many communities are still living on flood plains in Central America like their U.S. neighbors who build homes on the San Andreas fault. There will never be the perfect response, but continued multinational exercises in the region will develop relationships for future disasters. SOUTHCOM designed the *Fuerzas Aliadas* Humanitarian 2000 exercise to simulate multinational, interagency relief operations with the participation governmental and nongovernmental organizations from Central America, the Caribbean, and the United States. It also conducted a regionally-oriented disaster relief command post exercise to enhance military coordination with governments, regional agencies, and other actors.



Sailors and marines arriving at Managua, Nicaragua.

U.S. Navy (Leland B. Corner)

A regional response coordination center could be organized in Miami under the supervision of OFDA or the United Nations. During Hurricane Mitch, many donors went straight to the countries concerned. The nature of some contributions may never be known because they bypassed existing



Unloading vehicles at San Jose, Guatemala.

U.S. Navy (Leland B. Corner)

coordination centers. In place of such bilateral responses, a regional response coordination center could gather similar requests to develop a macro list of needs to show donors. If there had been such a center in Miami, the first contact made by donors would have occurred in an area where the lines of communication and transportation were unaffected by the storm. These steps would have represented a regional approach while reducing workloads and shifting the task of finding supplies and generating prioritized needs and transportation plans to specialists (military, government, and international and nongovernmental organizations) at the regional center.

Civil-military communication can encourage a standard for international disaster response, establishing a template for long-term recovery. Countries affected by Hurricane Mitch decided that strong national bodies can handle information and interaction on the municipal level. These

bodies involve communities in self-help projects, emergency management courses, technical training, and emergency and risk planning.

Hurricane Mitch in Central America revealed a need to become more agile. The key to multilateral humanitarian assistance lies in not regarding each relief operation as unique. Mitigating the impacts of disasters is in the interest of everyone and thus such missions require careful consideration of the mechanisms necessary to acquire and use reliable information. Some obstacles to information flow are endemic to crisis management. Therefore, a sensible approach is for civilian and military groups to devise a combined program regulated by policies of accountability and transparency. **JFQ**