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III

Hurricane Mitch and Honduras

An Erratic Path

Unlike Georges, Hurricane Mitch spawned in the waters of the southwestern Caribbean (see Figure 1). On October 24, 1998, Mitch was upgraded from a tropical storm to a hurricane. At its height, on October 26 and 27, it had sustained winds of 180 mph and achieved category V status (the most severe level) on the Saffir-Simpson scale.

Mitch tracked generally northwest and was originally primarily seen as a threat to Belize, the government of which ordered evacuation of historically vulnerable Belize City. Mitch's route, however, was erratic, and on October 26, the storm made a hard turn to the west and began impacting the north coast of Honduras. It was at this point that, according to OFDA's Fact Sheet #20 (November 25, 1998), Hurricane Mitch became "one of the strongest and most damaging storms to ever hit the Caribbean and Central America." With excruciating slowness, Mitch's center passed over Honduras and then Guatemala, with rain affecting not only these two countries but also El Salvador and especially Nicaragua.

Briefly regaining tropical storm strength in the early days of November 1998, Mitch moved over the Yucatan Peninsula, through the Gulf of Mexico, and across southern Florida. It died in the Atlantic toward the end of the first week of November-at the very time when its devastating impact on Central America was becoming fully appreciated.

Hurricane Mitch's impacts were related in very interesting ways to the most recent El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) event. The 1997-1998 ENSO brought major drought to Central America, including wildfires over 5% of the land (*Proyecto Estado de la Nacion*, 1999, p. 271). Together with serious ongoing deforestation and unwise agricultural practices, the ENSO effects made the land even more vulnerable to hurricane-induced rains and flooding than would have been the case otherwise. This was a classic example of interaction between a prior slow-onset disaster (the 1997-1998 ENSO) and a rapid-onset event (Hurricane Mitch). One report (about Nicaragua, but it easily generalizes to much of Central America) captured at a local level the various interactions:

> The people of Posoltega took the ax to the remaining forests for firewood-they could not afford gas or kerosene stoves-leaving the mountain slope like a sled. . . . Primitive slash-and-burn techniques and uncontrollable fires in the summer of 1997 [also] took a huge toll on the forests. . . . Deprived of thick vegetation, mountain slopes no longer hold back water. . . . When there is flooding, rivers overflow and create new tributaries overnight, sweeping away everything in their wake. [Bendaña, 1999, p. 17]

A Cruel, Nasty Storm

On October 26, Mitch still appeared to be a "normal" hurricane, and the tone of a cable ("Disaster Alert") from the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa to Washington was actually somewhat optimistic:

1. Honduras is bracing for a possible disaster within the next 24 hours as the effects of Hurricane Mitch reach the populated centers of the north coast.
2. No reports of damages have been received yet. Heavy rains are being reported in the department of Gracias a Dios located in the northeastern part of Honduras. Rains have also begun along the rest of the north coast of the country. Large swells are already developing along the coast and in the Bay Islands. Airports in the Islands and along the north coast have been closed to regular flights.
3. The Honduran permanent commission for contingencies (COPECO) is on top of the situation and has mobilized all the regional emergency committees located in Northern Honduras and the Bay Islands and they are executing their emergency plans. Hondurans living in Northern Honduras and in the Bay Islands have been advised to seek higher ground and to stock up with water and provisions.
4. President Carlos Flores met with his Cabinet Ministers at noon today to assess the situation and organize a response.

The initial scenario was that the islands and north coast of Honduras would bear the brunt of the storm and that the rest of Honduras, especially the capital, would receive rain but not be devastated. With the capital as a base, the government of Honduras would then organize assistance for the most affected areas.

As the damage ("heavy rains and extensive flooding") deepened along the north coast, on October 27 U.S. Ambassador James F. Creagan issued the disaster declaration required for a U.S. response. Nonetheless, the tone was still relatively low-key and requested only "helicopter and fixed wing aircraft assistance from [the U.S. military Southern Command-SOUTHCOM] JTF-Bravo for assessment purposes." However, the declaration cable then included some fateful words:

> The storm is moving west along the coast of Honduras. If the current trajectory and speed is [sic] maintained we estimate that the storm will pass 60 miles north of Roatan around midnight tonight (October 27).

The problem in this cable was the forward speed assumption. Subsequent alterations in both course and speed changed Hurricane Mitch from a regional/north coast disaster for Honduras into a national and, in many ways, a Central American regional catastrophe. For more than two days (October 28, 29, and into October 30), Mitch stalled off the coast and then only very slowly (October 30 and 31) moved inland over Honduras, first as a hurricane, then as a tropical storm, and finally as "only" a tropical depression. Essentially blanketing the country (see the accompanying October 26 and 29 satellite photos), Hurricane Mitch pumped vast amounts of rain into interior watersheds, in some places dumping more than a full year's average precipitation in just hours. As a tropical storm, Mitch passed within 15 miles of Tegucigalpa.

First because of the stall, then because of the cruel, leisurely pace of the storm, the entire situation changed. An October 30 cable from Tegucigalpa to Washington reflected increasing alarm:

> Tegucigalpa got hit with bad weather today. GOH [government of Honduras] ordered the population to leave work and return to their homes as the rain waters started to cause mudslides and wash out bridges. Tegucigalpa was effectively cut in half this afternoon by raging river waters.

Three days later, the full picture was becoming clear, and both tone and content in U.S. cable traffic were totally different. Stating that "this country has been turned into an archipelago," an understandably traumatized Ambassador Creagan sent a highly personal November 2 cable to Washington, which included the following:

1. Hurricane Mitch dealt a devastating blow to Honduras and hit its neighbors as well. I saw it by air yesterday and the destruction is major. Guanaja Island looked as if it has been bombed-not a building standing.
2. Destruction was anticipated in the Bay Islands and along the North Caribbean Coast, where normally tranquil rivers now occupy entire valleys from mountain to mountain. But the hurricane wreaked havoc in Central and Southern Honduras as well, changing the capital, Tegucigalpa, from a center for support and relief for coastal victims to a major casualty. The raging rivers and arroyos of

> this city built on hills destroyed whole neighborhoods, wiped out the GOH warehouse stocked with the food intended for distribution along the Caribbean, and flooded the Central City with its commercial zones and government offices. Entire hillsides collapsed, bringing down houses and snapping water pipes supplying the city. Many bridges fell from the force of water, taking with them water pipes spanning the rivers. Roads out of the capital have been cut by landslides. And so Tegucigalpa is faced with a rapidly diminishing water supply, a quickly approaching food shortage, and a lack of transportation. . . . If the situation in Tegucigalpa is not managed soon, there may well be a rapidly deteriorating social-and then political crisis. Already there is looting and killings, with gangs roaming some neighborhoods. There have been prison breaks. And to exacerbate matters the beloved mayor of this city, termed "El Gordito," was killed yesterday as his helicopter lifted off en route to the latest crisis-a landslide which became an earthy dam in the river and threatened to inundate the center city.

Also on November 2, Honduras President Carlos Flores addressed the nation (and the international press corps) and made the now famous plea: "Heed this SOS, which we launch from Honduras, in spite of our pride and our shame." Flores profiled the still incomplete damage reports to population ("thousands, not hundreds killed"), infrastructure (especially roads and bridges), and economy ("70% of our principal products"). He also announced a national curfew and the temporary suspension of civil liberties-notably, rights to home privacy and the removal of limits to detention. The purpose was to combat looting and other episodes of "public disorder."

Human losses notwithstanding, Hurricane Mitch will be remembered in the end as an infrastructure disaster. At one point or another, every major arterial road in the country was cut. Somewhere between 75 and 90 bridges were damaged or destroyed, and one estimate put houses lost at 70,000. For several weeks, it was impossible to consider "Honduras" as a functioning economic entity (or even as a viable nation-state). For all intents and purposes, the country went into international receivership the first week of November 1998.

The pace, nature, and design of reconstruction will determine the kind of Honduras that comes out of Mitch. Interestingly, at various points the Honduran government linked the disaster (and therefore reconstruction) to 1) NAFTA membership or a similar status with the U.S., 2) debt forgiveness or at least relief ("if the U.S. leads the Europeans and Japanese will follow"), and 3) illegal immigration ("thousands of Hondurans will be forced to flee to the United States"). The linkage arguments were especially sharp in mid-November 1998, when President Flores met separately with a group accompanying Tipper Gore, spouse of U.S. Vice President Al Gore. In this meeting President Flores was quite direct. According to a synopsis written later by a person who was present, Flores stated:

> If it was hard to govern Honduras before as a poor country it will be harder still to govern a nation that has been almost destroyed. People who have lost everything will swim, run, or walk north [i.e., to the U.S.]. We need opportunities for people to work in maquiladoras. We know that President Clinton sought fast track authority, but that it was not approved. NAFTA parity would help create jobs on the North Coast of Honduras. If that is impossible, CBI [Caribbean Basin Initiative] enhancement would help the maquiladoras grow. Either outcome would give Honduras a chance to avert tension and instability.

Media Attention Span

Covering a 10-week period (October 20-December 29, 1998) and the three main Honduran newspapers (*El Nuevo Dia, La Tribuna, and El Heraldo*), Table 7 reports the total number of Mitch stories published per week. Beginning with the pre-impact week and following the evolution of the post-impact efforts, a total of 2,236 stories were published detailing the impact of Mitch in Honduras.

Table 7

Hurricane Mitch Coverage:
The "Big Three" Honduran Newspapers

Week	*Number of Stories Published*
Week 1 (October 20-27)	61
Week 2 (October 28-November 3)	343
Week 3 (November 4-10)	437
Week 4 (November 11-17)	363
Week 5 (November 18-November 24)	292
Week 6 (November 25-December 1)	280
Week 7 (December 2-8)	123
Week 8 (December 9-15)	118
Week 9 (December 16-22)	119
Week 10 (December 23-29)	100

Figure 3 graphs the same coverage data, illustrating the steady increase and then decrease in attention. Specifically, during the first three weeks, coverage rose, but at week three it began to decline. Interestingly, week six to week seven appears to be another break point, with Mitch-related stories dropping more than half, from 280 to 123.

Interestingly, there was quite an inter-newspaper discrepancy in Honduran media coverage of Hurricane Mitch. *La Tribuna* led with 912 stories over the 10 weeks, followed by *El Heraldo* with 682 and *El Nuevo Dia* with 642.

Assistance Credit

Table 8 and Table 9 show how the Honduran press reported foreign assistance. Again, the tables are "story counts" of assistance reported by source (donor). Table 8 contains the story counts for assistance identified by country. The most frequently noted donor was the United States, which was featured in 116 stories, followed by Spain in 42 stories and France in 36. Among the 116 stories that mentioned the United States, OFDA was mentioned 7 times, USAID was mentioned 15, and Peace Corps was mentioned once.

Table 8

Hurricane Mitch:
Honduran Media Recognition of Assistance, by Donor Nation

Country	*Number of Stories*
USA	116
Spain	42
France	36
Mexico	32

Cuba	21
Japan	21
Germany	13
China	10
Argentina	8
Great Britain	7
Holland	6
Netherlands	5
Taiwan	4
Venezuela	4
Canada	3
Columbia	3
Korea	3
Switzerland	3
El Salvador	2
Ireland	2
Italy	2
Morocco	2
Norway	2
Peru	2
Uruguay	2
Belgium	1
Brazil	1
Chile	1
Costa Rica	1
Ecuador	1
Israel	1
Nicaragua	1
Paraguay	1

Poland	1
Portugal	1
South Africa	1
Sweden	1

Table 9 contains the story counts for assistance from NGOs, IGOs, and MNCs. Most frequently mentioned was the IADB in 33 stories, followed by the United Nations in 26, *Escuela de Rescate* "Alert" (USA) in 18, and the *Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica* (BCIE) in 17.

Table 9

Hurricane Mitch:
Honduran Media Recognition of Assistance,
by NGOs, IGOs, and MNCs

NGO/IGO/MNC	Number of Stories
Inter-American Development Bank	33
World Food Program	31
United Nations	26
World Bank	18
Central American Bank of Economic Integration	17
International Monetary Fund	11
Organization of American States	6
Red Cross (Spain)	6
Honduran Exiles	5
Caritas	3
British Christian Organization	2
Rescue School "Alert" (USA)	2
Bimbo	2
Bolsa Samaritana (Christian NGO)	2
TZU CHI	2
Queen Sofia Foundation (Spain)	2

Paramedics for Children	2
Roman Catholic Church	2

The following NGOs, IGOs, and MNCs were mentioned in one story: Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Integration, Christian Businessmen (USA), Iberia, Continental Airlines, German Red Cross, City Bank, Catholic Archdiocese in Peru, University of Boston, CARE, Save the Children, Hondurans in New Orleans, Case Corporation, Central American Medical Reach, GTZ, Cartelone Corporation, Detroit Pistons, Fisher House, and World Vision-Taiwan.

The Casualty Issue

The human loss issue surrounding Hurricane Mitch in Honduras will probably never be settled. The official figures are now repeated so often that they are enshrined in the principal international databases (6,600 killed, 8,052 missing, 11,998 injured, etc.-see Table 10 for one set of official Hurricane Mitch losses for all Central American countries).

However, the Honduras casualty figures, especially for those killed, were highly exaggerated, if not frankly false. The reasons are related very closely to the reported death toll for Nicaragua and the need to compete for international media attention. That is, the Honduran government could not allow its country's needs to be overshadowed by the death toll in Nicaragua, and the government got seriously carried away with its casualty reports.

One way to disentangle the Honduran human loss figures is to track the numbers reported through OFDA Fact Sheets. Initial OFDA field reports related only a few dozen killed, but these were clearly both preliminary and fragmentary. The first Fact Sheet that reported a number was #4, on November 2, 1998, which put the number killed at 254. Fact Sheet #5 the following day reported 258 killed and 158 missing. Interestingly, an OFDA field report of November 3 placed the human losses at 334 killed and 1,064 missing. This may have been the best and most accurate figure ever reported regarding this disaster in Honduras, because on November 4 the games began.

The impetus was the terrible but highly concentrated losses caused by the side collapse of the Casitas volcano in Nicaragua and the ensuing flash flood. On November 2 (Fact Sheet #4), Nicaragua reported 1,212 killed and 2,000 missing. (The Nicaraguan losses would eventually grow to 2,863 killed and 884 missing by Fact Sheet #20 on November 25; after that they would hold steady.)

Fact Sheet #6 for Honduras on November 4 suddenly reported 874 killed and an astounding 11,100 missing, followed the next day (Fact Sheet #7, November 5) by 5,000 killed and 5,000 missing. From there the figures only increased. By Fact Sheet #20 on November 25, Honduras was listed as suffering 6,600 killed and 8,052 missing. These numbers would eventually be reduced to 5,657 killed and 8,052 permanently missing-still implying more than 13,000 killed.

Table 11 presents the entire array of figures for Honduras and Nicaragua (plus Guatemala and El Salvador) compiled from OFDA Fact Sheets #1-#22. The November 3-5 numbers for Honduras highlight the radical change in casualty numbers just discussed, which we probed a bit further in field visits.

Several key actors stated that when the Casitas event occurred and with the international media moving to Nicaragua, the highest levels of both the Honduran military and government saw a major shift in international sympathy and a consequent likely change in the country's share of reconstruction funding. Shortly thereafter, the Honduran government released the 5,000 killed and 5,000 missing numbers. The numbers then went up from there.

A mid-November internal document from a donor government throws some interesting light on this data problem. As late as November 13, the report noted a "serious discrepancy" between a key ministry and the just-created National Emergency Committee of Honduras (*Consejo Nacional de Emergencia*, CONE)-to which we will return below. The ministry was reporting 1,097 killed, approximately 3,000 missing, and nearly 490,000 affected. The CONE figures, however, were 6,600 killed, 8,752 missing, and almost 1.4 million affected. In field interviews we found that the minister involved with the release of the lower figures was told, on or about November 13, to stop releasing any further

casualty figures. The CONE figures then became the "official" Honduran losses.

Information uncovered in later field visits in mid-1999 corroborated the view that Honduras lost only a fraction of the implied 13,000 killed (or even of the officially reported 5,867). Without exception, local officials could only talk of dozens lost. When asked about hundreds, they would always point off vaguely toward another town and say, "*tal vez mas allá*" ("perhaps over there"). One *mas allá* always led to another, however, until we ran out of *mas allás*. Our best and admittedly seat-of-the-pants estimate would be 3,000 killed by Hurricane Mitch in Honduras.

Economic Losses: The EIU Assessment

The breadth of the hurricane damage to Honduras, especially to production and the transportation and communication infrastructures, was extraordinary. Nonetheless, as in all disasters, some sectors tended to benefit, as the following EIU assessment made clear (also made clear is the fact that international assistance was the only thing keeping Honduras intact as a nation-state):

> The EIU forecasts that the impact of Hurricane Mitch on economic activity will lead to a GDP contraction next year. Based on the preliminary data available, we expect this contraction to be as much as 6%. . . . On the supply side, there will be a sharp contraction in agricultural output with damage to basic grains in low-lying areas particularly severe. Manufacturing output will also contract, but less sharply, as domestic industries suffer from the damage done to plant and stocks. But production at over 80% of *maquila* companies is expected to return to capacity over the next three months, and the construction sector will expand strongly as reconstruction gets under way. The effect of the hurricane and its aftermath on the services sector activity will be mixed; some services will contract, reflecting the decline in private consumption, while others-particularly welfare services supported by aid flows-will expand.
>
> On the demand side, private consumption will fall sharply as many Hondurans have lost their livelihoods, particularly in the worst affected areas in agriculture, manufacturing and services. Exports will contract, while the import bill will be high as the country imports to rebuild and to substitute for lost domestic output. Private investment will also rise as the private sector repairs damage to productive sectors and the economy is deregulated in the utilities and infrastructure sectors, attracting some foreign investment. Offsetting these negative effects of hurricane damage on private consumption and exports will be a strong boost to public spending and investment supported by foreign aid flows. [EIU (Honduras), Fourth Quarter, 1998, p. 29)

The Political Context of the Impacts

Hurricane Mitch exacerbated tension between the executive and legislative branches in Honduras and highlighted an enduring and embarrassing problem for the country-corruption-which in Honduras is so pervasive that it has its own denominator, *champa*. Shortly after the hurricane struck, the EIU stated:

> The need to implement emergency measures swiftly will make the executive branch keen to wrest some power from Congress in order to prevent legislation from getting bogged down in political bargaining. This concentration of power may not necessarily affect the high approval rating that the president, Carlos Flores Facussé, had been enjoying before the hurricane struck. His efforts to mobilise international support for the humanitarian relief effort and to put the issue of debt relief very much on the agenda . . . have been impressive. But Mr. Flores will need to ensure that the aid flowing through government institutions is allocated transparently and effectively, and that it is distributed throughout the country to those most in need. [EIU (Honduras), Fourth Quarter, 1998, p. 28]

The corruption issue, in particular, simply would not go away for the Flores administration, and it began to be publicly linked with donor resistance to providing the massive assistance required to rebuild the country:

> The Honduran government published its reconstruction plan in April . . . and is hoping to receive up to $3.6bn over the medium term, on concessional terms, to finance the reconstruction work. However, there

> are likely to be some problems in attaining much of the financing. The donors will press the government to ensure that all projects are fully accounted for and that the allocation of all funds is conducted in a transparent manner, particularly in light of the recent report released by the Human Rights Ombudsman, Leo Valladares . . . which alleged 17 cases of mismanagement of aid. [EIU (Honduras), Second Quarter, 1999, p. 28]

According to the same EIU report (p. 33), the Valladares report, also published in April, had become quite a domestic political issue:

> The ruling Partido Liberal (PL) in Congress reacted by attacking Mr. Valladares for damaging the image of Honduras and the prospects of further funding, and voted to have his term of office reduced from six years to four and to reduce his mandate by excluding investigations of corruption. The public outcry that this caused prompted a U-turn by the government, which then blamed the president of the National Congress, Rafael Pineda Ponce, for attempting to stifle Mr. Valladares. The reputations of the government and of Congress have been tarnished by the affair, and transparency and accountability will now be monitored even more closely by aid donors, as the suspicion remains that the authorities are more likely to keep allegations of corruption quiet than to denounce and investigate them fully.

Quoted in a separate publication (Jeffrey, 1999, pp. 32-33), Valladares stated that his investigation of white-collar disaster corruption turned out to be even "more dangerous" than his previous work on human rights violations by the military.[1] Somewhat more colorfully than the EIU, Jeffrey (p. 33) described the maneuvering that swirled around the Valladares report:

> Flores did not just get mad at Valladares, he got even. He called Congress President Rafael Pineda Ponce and ordered that Valladares' mandate be destroyed. Late on the night of April 20, Congress cut the commissioner's terms and limited his job to passively receiving complaints. As word leaked out the next day, European ambassadors threatened possible aid cuts. *The New York Times* called for a legislative change of heart. Under attack, Pineda Ponce lived up to his nickname of "Ping-Pong" and announced a new vote. On April 27, with hundreds of pro-Valladares protesters battling police outside, the Congress voted unanimously to leave the commissioner's mandate unchanged.

In the end, as is commonly the case with disasters, the government of Honduras was caught between a rock and a hard place and could not "win" politically no matter what it did:

> The reconstruction effort following the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch at the end of October has dominated the political scene in Honduras. Despite overseeing the restoration of vital infrastructure by the end of the first quarter of 1999, the government has been criticised for progressing too slowly with the programme. Much of the work already completed has been carried out under the auspices of an international relief effort, whereas the Honduran government, with its scarce resources, has only managed to make slow progress. Many construction companies have been unwilling to grant additional credit to the government before outstanding payments have been made, and there have also been substantial bureaucratic obstacles in processing bids for reconstruction work. . . .
>
> The president, Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé, has come under fire from the Foro Ciudadano (FC), a civic group formed recently by intellectuals and professionals, for concentrating too many decisions within the executive. The FC claims that Mr. Flores's unwillingness to delegate responsibilities runs contrary to the urgent needs of the reconstruction effort, generating bottlenecks and huge delays. . . . Public criticism of the performance of the reconstruction cabinet has continued to rise; in March and April civic and business groups published strongly worded advertisements in national newspapers to voice their dissatisfaction with the slow progress of the work. [EIU (Honduras), Second Quarter, 1999, p. 31]

The stakes inherent in reconstruction could hardly be higher, not only for the Honduran political class, but also for the entire Honduran elite. The quality of leadership was truly and visibly on trial. Ruhl (2000, p. 63) portrayed the system as walking a tightrope:

> The vast devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch . . . created a critical political challenge for Honduran elites. Effective use of international relief funds to rebuild the country and to provide aid to the thousands who had lost everything could raise the legitimacy of democratic government. On the other hand, elite corruption and incompetence at this critical juncture . . . could worsen mass cynicism and disillusionment.

At a more specific level, one especially interesting aspect of the Honduran governmental response to Mitch involved the military-civil-military relations specifically. Before Mitch struck, the Flores administration had been moving-carefully-to amend the Honduran constitution so as to place the armed forces under (at least more) civilian control. The military had governed Honduras directly for nearly 20 years prior to 1981 and had been "the power behind the throne" until well into the 1990s, so this was a very delicate issue. Two months before Mitch hit, Flores was laying the groundwork to name a civilian minister of defense, and military coup rumors began to circulate. All of the response problems associated with Mitch, however, opened a political window of opportunity for Flores, who was able to install a civilian defense minister in late January 1999. Calling the Honduran military "Mitch-weakened," Jeffrey (1999, p. 29) quoted German Calix of CARITAS (Catholic Relief), as saying:

> Mitch demonstrated the total inefficiency of the military. The officials have spent all their time fighting among themselves and struggling for political power, so they were simply not prepared to confront an emergency. COPECO didn't have a clue what to do.

A somewhat unfair generalization, this statement nonetheless reflects a widespread perception.

Institutional Change and the Politics of Honduran Sidelining

Given the broad perception of government ineptitude in responding to Hurricane Mitch, an analysis of problems in governmental institutional response is in order.

Enacted by the Honduran National Congress in January 1991 and in typically vague language, Decree Number 9-90-E created a Permanent Commission for Contingencies (*Comisión Permanente de Contingencias*, COPECO) to

> adopt political measures oriented to assist the population, rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged areas caused by natural disasters, which have an effect on the economic activity and well-being of the population, as well as to program and develop different activities to prevent negative consequences in the areas of higher risk for disasters.

COPECO replaced Honduras's earlier COPEN (*Comité Permanente para Emergencias Nacionales*-the Permanent Committee for National Emergencies). Unfortunately, COPECO was to be managed by a conglomeration of ministries, secretariats, and commissions. Thus, it never received a mandate as a fully independent institution with administrative and emergency budgets, remaining instead dependent upon other governmental organizations for "management" and upon the presidency for appointments. Indeed, the president of Honduras did name the head of COPECO, and it was usually the vice president, with all of the real and symbolic importance-or lack thereof-which that implies.

In practice COPECO was funded, again rather vaguely, by annual contributions from the national government, national and international donations, loans, and any "resources and values provided by other sources." One media account reported the annual COPECO budget before Hurricane Mitch at the equivalent of $200,000. This figure was "about right" according to one person we interviewed. In short, COPECO was starved for resources.

Beneath COPECO in the institutional hierarchy were a set of CODERs (*Comites de Emergencias Regionales*) and CODEMs (*Comites de Emergencias Municipales*). Composed of 11 brigades, CODERs operated as civil defense units at the regional level while the much more numerous CODEMs did so at the municipal level.

When Mitch's effects were fully felt, COPECO was overwhelmed at the national level and temporarily cut off from CODER and CODEM teams in the field. For weeks after the disaster, many officers of CODERs and CODEMs acted independently-much to their credit. In the capital, however, COPECO was bogged down not only by the disaster but

also by politics.

To give it appropriate credit, COPECO did seem to do a good job of organizing the evacuation of the north coast in the early days of Hurricane Mitch and probably saved many lives in that region. The CODEM brigades really deserve the operational credit, however, because they were already active in the northern regions of Honduras to deal with the severe drought and wildfires induced by the 1997-1998 ENSO.

Interestingly, when the true scale of the Mitch disaster became apparent and with COPECO taking a lot of the blame, President Flores removed the vice president as its head and sent him to his home region to manage relief efforts there. Flores also released the various ministers responsible for managing COPECO, letting each take care of relief efforts in his/her home regions. Not strong to begin with, COPECO's organizational structure and leadership were torn apart by this action.

Gutted politically and organizationally, and with only four phone lines in its office (an interesting indicator of the office's importance in its own right) and with no institutional e-mail capability, COPECO could neither gather nor distribute the information necessary to manage a major national disaster.[2] By decree, President Flores then created the *Comisión Nacional de Emergencia* (CONE) as a new umbrella organization to preside over the government's various ministries involved in the response.

Officially led by the minister of the interior but without a structure, CONE would also have likely collapsed were it not for a private sector initiative. Arturo Corrales, one-time presidential candidate and government-contracted statistical analyst, stepped in and "offered" his services to President Flores. Corrales (really the man in charge) provided a command center with 30 phone lines, faxes, computers, and what one observer called the "show" for the media. In reality, CONE was all about data (including the famous casualty figures) and information management. It was never involved in actual response operations.

With CONE totally dependent upon Arturo Corrales's infrastructure, certain problems were certain to arise. One had to do with the database. It turned out that the statistical data had been gathered for Corrales' election campaign, which resulted in the neglect of persons under the voting age of 18. When these data were used to determine food allotments for a particular area, with those under 18 not counted, shortages were inevitable.

Interestingly, no military appointees were named to the CONE management structure, leaving the military to work essentially on its own and more closely with international teams. The military had set up an independent "COC" (*Centro de Operaciones y Comando*, a Command and Operations Center). The COC was all military and included foreign military representatives from all but one contributing country. The exception was the United States, which sent an officer to the COC planning meetings every afternoon-but only to coordinate with COC, not to receive tasks or assignments. In the end, responding to Mitch was overwhelmingly a question of logistics, and as one observer noted "the military was everything."

Therefore, what happened to CO-PECO in responding to Mitch? In short, the answer is that it was sidelined/marginalized-not once but actually twice and from two different directions. On one side, COPECO lost its decisionmaking, coordination, and planning functions (and its chance for real organizational profile) to CONE. On the other side, it lost operational responsibilities to the all-military COC.

In retrospect, while COPECO was overwhelmed by the Mitch disaster, more importantly it was not capable of accordion-like institutional expansion. It did not have the resources and institutional capability to rise to the occasion. More poignantly, it was not *allowed* to rise to the occasion, run operations, and gain (positively) the national and international media spotlight and credit. With 1) COPECO sidelined, 2) CONE emphasizing information but not capable of real coordination, and 3) the COC particularly focusing on air logistics, international donors were often left without guidance. The operational result was "stovepipe" assistance by individual donor agencies in particular areas-very reminiscent of aid in the 1950s and 1960s.

Consistent with our marginalization proposition, both CONE and COC disappeared after the Mitch response began to wind down, leaving the discredited COPECO in place. Interestingly, President Flores' 1999 attempts to revitalize

COPECO have had some unintended consequences. The new COPECO leadership structure includes both an executive president and a commissioner. Unfortunately, each believes that the other works for him (both answer to Flores), and each has a different vision of what the "new COPECO" should look like. The September-October-November 1999 flood emergencies in northern Honduras brought the differences to public attention, and the Honduran media began calling COPECO the "two-headed beast."

Blame Themes

Given the tremendous impact of Hurricane Mitch on Honduras (Hurricane Georges in the Dominican Republic paled by comparison), there were three principal blame themes, all a bit different from those in the Dominican Republic:

1. *Weak Infrastructure, Lack of Mitigation, Poor Preparedness, and Corruption*-The media in Honduras (and President Flores) were quick to argue that the catastrophe was due to a) Honduran underdevelopment/poverty and b) the "corrupt leadership" of previous administrations. This was tied specifically to the next blame theme.
2. *Hurricane Fifi in 1974 and "Lessons Not Learned"*-The media asked repeatedly why the Honduran infrastructure was not ready for another devastating hurricane after the country's experience in 1974. They repeatedly cited clientelism and corruption. A prominent theme was "the past," the "old way of doing things" that had left Honduras so vulnerable.
3. *Local versus National Government*-The media gave extensive coverage to local governments (municipalities) that were blaming the central government for not providing the necessary aid.

Interestingly, again the international donor community received little or no blame. In fact, the Honduran media gave ample and positive coverage to both specific assistance efforts and the visits of many foreign dignitaries.

Finally, media attention to the failure of the country to learn lessons from 1974 and Hurricane Fifi should be kept in mind as Hurricane Mitch joins Fifi in the category of supposed "teacher" hurricanes. The implicit question is: How will the Honduran media and people react to the next great hurricane catastrophe if the government fails, or largely fails, to learn the lessons of 1998 and Mitch? This is an extremely important question not only for the Honduran government but also for the international community. The answer will largely determine social and political volatility during and following response to the next major (and inevitable) disaster in Honduras.

In Sum

No one would ever have expected a hurricane of Mitch's magnitude to simply stall off the Honduran coast and then meander across the country, pumping unprecedented amounts of rainfall into the nation's (deforested) watersheds. In the end, wind and storm surge damage paled in comparison with riverine flooding, and Hurricane Mitch passed from being a disaster to a truly historic national catastrophe. The storm has certainly entered the collective memory of the Honduran people. As two journalists remarked in passing, "Just as it recarved the physical landscape, Mitch seems to have carved a fundamental sense of vulnerability into people's psyches" (Boyer and Pell, 1999, p. 38).

For our purposes here, however, the key point is that the organization nominally in charge of disaster response in Honduras (COPECO) did not play a significant role in the response to Hurricane Mitch. Quickly overwhelmed, it was completely marginalized by the creation of the all-military COC and by the emergence of CONE, which flourished for awhile but then disappeared. Apparently, Honduras will thus confront its next major disaster with a weak and demoralized COPECO, an agency with a history-and therefore an expectation-of being sidelined. In addition, although failure to learn effectively from one disaster (Fifi in 1974) is perhaps excusable, failure to learn from Mitch will tax the tolerance of even the historically patient Honduran people. Overall it is not an optimistic picture.

Note 1

This corresponds in interesting ways to some public opinion survey data from Mexico that have been recently published (see Gawronski and Olson, 2000).

Note 2

In addition to the COPECO collapse hampering domestic response, Lister (2001, p. 41) notes that the lack of a

"strong, central coordinating entity" also reduced the effectiveness of international assistance and that "many agencies were forced to go through the same information-gathering and needs assessment processes."

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