

Central America

CHOLUCA, SOUTHERN HONDURAS

Picking up the pieces after Hurricane Mitch wreaks devastation

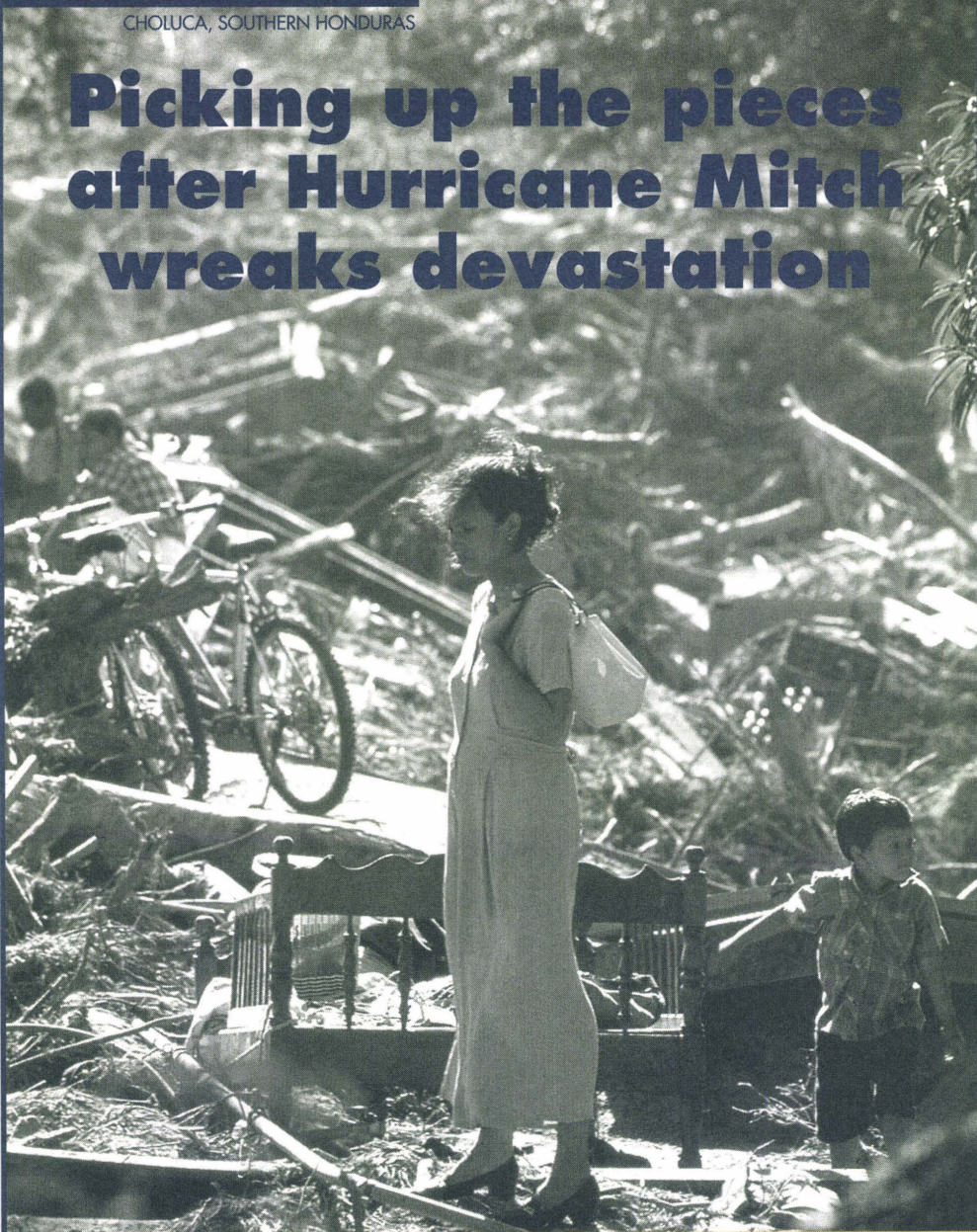


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“I visited Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala where I was able to witness with my own eyes the unprecedented scale of the natural disaster that had hit the region. These countries do not have the means to deal with such destruction on their own. As a priority we have to provide shelter to people who have lost their homes and prevent the outbreak of epidemics. ECHO is giving financial support to the non-governmental organisations taking part in the emergency efforts. But what is also clear is that the European Commission must ensure that these countries receive the means to carry out long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.”

Emma Bonino,

European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs

A month after Hurricane Mitch left a trail of devastation in Central America, international aid operations are still in full force, helping millions of victims. The damage was so widespread that aid workers have yet to reach some remote villages that were cut off totally by the hurricane. Mitch was one of the most powerful tropical storms of the century. It whipped through Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, sometimes at 305 kilometres per hour and according to the latest estimates leaving at least 17,000 people dead or missing.

Honduras worst affected

When Hurricane Mitch swept into Honduras, it left behind damage which will take literally years to repair. Some areas have been completely destroyed. Non-stop rain made 50 of the country's rivers overflow, and strong currents destroyed bridges and roads, flooding many villages. Access overland became impossible. About 1.5 million people have been left homeless in Honduras, and nearly three-quarters of the country's harvest was lost, according to the government.

Nicaragua: mudslides, mines

In Nicaragua, torrential rains caused catastrophic flooding in the north of the country. But that was not the worst of it. The rains caused massive mudslides in 10 villages around the base of the volcano Casitas. As Mitch continued its deadly rampage, the volcano erupted and an earthquake rocked the town of Chinandega. At least 3,000 died in Nicaragua, and nearly a million were forced to flee their homes. As a result of the storm, 70 percent of the country's roads are impassable. And Nicaraguans now face a new hazard: the torrential rains dislodged an unknown number of anti-personnel mines, left-overs of the war between the Sandinista government and the Contra rebels during the 1980s. They are difficult to identify with the naked eye, and many of them have plastic components that enable them to float. Floodwaters are carrying them far and wide. Mitch has thus wiped out much of the painstaking work landmine clearance experts have carried out since the war.

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CEE: VIII/57

Humanitarian catastrophe avoided, but fear hangs over Kosovo

The agreements reached between Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and the international community may have drawn the Serbian province of Kosovo back from the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. But the mainly ethnic Albanian population fighting for autonomy still feels fear, rather than relief. Though some Kosovo Albanians are starting to return to their villages, the great majority - 175,000 according to the latest estimates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - dare not go home because Serb police are stationed at the entrances to their villages. Many have no home to go to anyway, because of the widespread destruction of houses during the Serb onslaught.

"The last groups of villagers who were living out in the open in the mountains have now found refuge with families or friends," explained ECHO's Carl Hallergard, who has just returned from a fact-finding mission in the field. "The humanitarian conditions are critical, given the overpopulation in villages spared the fighting which are now hosting those displaced on a temporary basis. But it is clear that a humanitarian catastrophe has been avoided," he said. ECHO has decided to earmark ECU 10 million for victims of the conflict in Kosovo. This aid will go in the first place towards providing shelters, and re-roofing houses which were burned out, to take the strain off homes where up to 40 people are sheltering. It is clear that host families cannot bear the burden for long. There are now enough emergency supplies to meet most material needs, but it is still difficult for non-governmental organisations to distribute them. They are working in high-risk conditions: some roads are still mined, NGOs are not authorised to use radios, and snow storms are adding to the difficulties of moving around.

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Picking up the pieces after Hurricane Mitch wreaks devastation



When the scale of the natural disaster became apparent in early November, ECHO immediately released ECU 6.8 million in emergency assistance for victims of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. In addition it redirected around ECU three million, which had already been made available to humanitarian organisations based in the countries concerned before disaster struck. ECHO's main partners there are the German and Spanish Red Cross, the International Federation of the Red Cross, as well as about 10 other non-governmental organisations active in the region.

The international community has so far provided about \$945 million to help the victims of Hurricane Mitch, according to latest estimates available. That money comes in addition to the cancellation of \$239 million worth of debt. The main donors are the United States (\$200 million), Spain (\$180 million) and the European Union (\$120 million).

Urgent: transport of bare necessities

The most urgent task facing the aid community remains the transport of bare necessities like food aid, blankets, cooking utensils, medicines and water purification products. Hundreds of centres had to be set up for people who were displaced, or homeless. These are now so overcrowded that aid workers fear a spread of diarrhoea and respiratory diseases. Pregnant women, children and the elderly are the most vulnerable. Médecins Sans Frontières says it fears a medical disaster in the worst-hit regions, given that health centres have been destroyed and that flood waters are a breeding ground for epidemics of cholera and malaria. The number of victims is so high that many corpses have yet to be retrieved.

In the first few days following the disaster, access to victims was the main problem. Transport by plane or helicopter was the only practicable means of access. Now, stocks can again be carried by road to most places, but about 100 villages in Nicaragua were still cut off at time of writing and could only be supplied by helicopter.

Although ECHO is focusing its efforts on the most urgent humanitarian needs, it is clear that the region will need far longer-term assistance. The scale of the disaster caused by Mitch highlights once more the need to strengthen policies to prevent disasters and to deal with them better at local level. That is why ECHO has developed its own regional prevention programme, called DIPECHO (Disaster Preparedness ECHO)



ECHO's global reach

ALGERIA

Helping Algeria's Sahrawi refugees

Sahrawi refugees awaiting a political settlement to determine their future are about to spend another winter in one of the most inhospitable regions on earth. For more than 20 years now, 150,000 of them have been camped out in tents in the deserts of south west Algeria. In summer, temperatures rise above 50 degrees in the shade, while during winter it is bitterly cold. Add frequent sandstorms and drought, and you can begin to imagine just how difficult life is for Algeria's Sahrawi refugees. The refugees have settled in four camps near Tindouf. As most of the men have joined the army, the camps are mainly inhabited by women, children and old people. To cover their food needs, ECHO has granted ECU 10 million to European non-governmental organisations involved in assisting the region.

SUDAN

Famine, but glimmers of hope

Famine continues to afflict Sudan despite the international community's massive aid effort. Both people displaced by ongoing fighting between pro-government forces and rebels and those in government-held territory are affected. So what are the difficulties? First, non-governmental organisations are working under such dangerous conditions that they are not always able to ensure aid is distributed properly. Given such insecurity, efficient planning is impossible. Between March and August this year, teams from Médecins Sans Frontières had to be evacuated no less than 13 times from the region of Bahr El Ghazal and the Western Upper Nile. Every time, they had to leave starving children behind, and abandon courses of treatment for patients. When aid workers returned, the children had disappeared, supplies had been looted and health centres burned to the ground. Replenishing supplies is made difficult because aircraft are often unable to land, due to flooding. All the same, there have been some improvements. Since the conflicting parties declared a ceasefire in July, humanitarian organisations have been able to work in the region of Bahr El Ghazal, where the needs are most acute. As a result, the mortality rate - which in August was ten times higher than the criteria used to declare an emergency situation - has dropped slightly. Then, on November 19, the conflicting parties for the first time allowed humanitarian convoys across the front-line in the south of the country, a step which should improve access to those worst affected by the fighting. Now, for the first time since 1995, food aid can also be delivered by rail convoy. In the hope of helping to improve the situation in Sudan further, ECHO decided to give ECU 10 million to the World Food Programme for the distribution of food aid. Supplies will be distributed mainly by air for security reasons.

PHOTO © ROGER LEMOINE/GAMMA LIAISON

'The infants are swaddled into little bundles, lying apathetically on the floor'

Médecins sans Frontières announced at the end of September that it was pulling out of North Korea, where it was carrying out medical and food aid, because of lack of cooperation from the authorities. Marie-France Bourgeois, expert in assessing and monitoring humanitarian aid, worked for ECHO in North Korea between August 1997 and May 1998. She was advising and collaborating with UNICEF and medical NGOs that were setting up programmes in the wake of catastrophic floods in 1995 and 1996, then drought and a tidal wave in 1997. These natural disasters aggravated very severe food shortages in an economy that had already collapsed. She describes her experiences in extracts from her diary.

September 1997, South Hamgyong Province, Hamhung City, Provincial Children's Centre: I'm on my own and feeling very distressed – my colleague, a doctor, is unable to function after a visit we made together earlier in the day. He's been to Liberia, but was so shaken by his first exposure to severe malnutrition here that he couldn't deal with any more right then. You never hear children crying in these places. The infants are swaddled into little bundles, lying apathetically on the blanket-covered floor, which is heated when there is coal available. These institutions are basically orphanages. It is obvious that these infants, aged under one, are not thriving: They have chronic malnutrition, and are not gaining weight at the rate they should be with the humanitarian aid that is being delivered. They are in a state that threatens their cognitive development. Chronic malnutrition is harder to spot and to define than dramatic 'Africa' starvation. The infants are always worst off. They have marasmus, which makes them lethargic. They are very wrinkled. They look much older than they are, their skin is dry, grey, not like normal, plush baby skin. They are constantly licking their lips as if seeking a nipple because they're so hungry. There is supposed to be a system of wet-nursing, but I've never seen a wet nurse though I've asked repeatedly to meet one. What are they being fed on? The healthcare workers say it's a mixture of wet-nursing and dried skimmed milk, but that's impossible, given the state these infants are in.

In a separate room, there are children aged from one month to five years. They are all sitting, they don't smile, they don't run around like normal children. If you give them a toy, they don't play. Some have fallen over, and can't get up. ECHO is funding UNICEF, which is distributing high-energy milk (HEM) that is supposed to be fed to them in small portions 6-8 times a day. My job is to make sure the money spent is properly utilised. The warehouse is full of protein-enriched feed, vitamins, maize and oral rehydration salts (ORS), which are used to treat diarrhoea that can lead to malnourishment. I don't know if the ORS is being used correctly, or at all. There is also high-energy milk (HEM) in the warehouse, but doctors do not seem to know how to implement a programme using HEM – we get the impression it is perceived as normal dried powder milk. On several visits, we have been treated to a hot cuppa of HEM.

November 1997, return to South Hamgyong Province, Hamhung City, Provincial Children's Centre: The children are generally in better condition. At last, I hear children's voices. Some are even standing. But one room holds about 20 incredibly malnourished children, aged between two months and three years, filthy, hungry and sick. The room stinks. We are told they have just arrived. Where are they from? Are they orphans, or from families that are not seen as 'loyal' to the regime? Why are they not with the others? No answers. The warehouse is still

full, but it seems that the staff has not been distributing vitamins or corn soya blend (from the World Food Programme) over the past two months. Why not? No-one explains anything, and we hear contradictory stories.

April 1998, Hamhung City: Médecins du Monde (France and Greece) are working at the provincial paediatric hospital, the reference hospital for the whole region. But it's almost empty – not what you'd expect. Anyway, this particular hospital closes at lunchtime. Perhaps doctors have gone to collect natural medicinal herbs which they depend on heavily – traditional koryo medicine, which they use for all ailments, including malnutrition. Whatever the potential merits of koryo medicine, it cannot cure malnutrition. Only the right feeding can do that.

(Later the same day.) In March, after long delays, MDM was finally allowed to set up a therapeutic feeding centre in this province to bring children back up from severe malnutrition to normal weight. I have been here on two previous occasions. It is clear the staff have had training in treating malnutrition, but the children are taking longer to recover than they should. There are two rooms full of malnourished children, say 35 in all. There are some older children this time, two brothers, say five and seven years old. They look skinny, but it's actually a good sign. It means they've lost swelling in their faces that is a sure sign of malnutrition. The last time I came, there were only three children being treated. I wonder why there are suddenly so many more? No answers.

After visits such as these, I'm always left with many questions:

Where are the older orphans?

During my visits to children's centres ('orphanages'?) in seven locations, I never saw children aged five to 12. I was told they were centralised in one institution, but I could not get independent corroboration.

How do they manage without recognised drugs and supplies?

There is a chronic shortage of medicines and medical supplies. We often see stocks of koryo herbs, but seldom any conventional, allopathic medicines in the hospital pharmacies.

How can we build up an accurate picture of what's happening?

I visited 70 health institutions of various types. We have consistently had trouble with local authorities over getting access to the centres we need to visit, and our visits are often delayed.

Why have I never seen children being fed?

Whatever time I go, they tell me the children have just been fed. It seems to me that the milk is being used very sparingly, so the children are not gaining weight fast enough.

How can we monitor the success of our interventions reliably?

I am not allowed to use the usual tools (upper arm circumference measurement bracelets, scales, weight-for-height charts), so all my findings are based purely on observations. I visited centres where all of these items had been delivered, but they had never been used and were being stored in locked rooms that they unlocked to show me.

ECHO is planning a project worth ECU 2 million to help children in North Korea this winter. The aim is to distribute coal, winter clothes and blankets, and to provide support for nurseries.



ECHO FINANCES:

'Humanitarian aid, by its very nature, must be managed with total integrity, to the highest possible standards'

Alberto Navarro, Director, ECHO

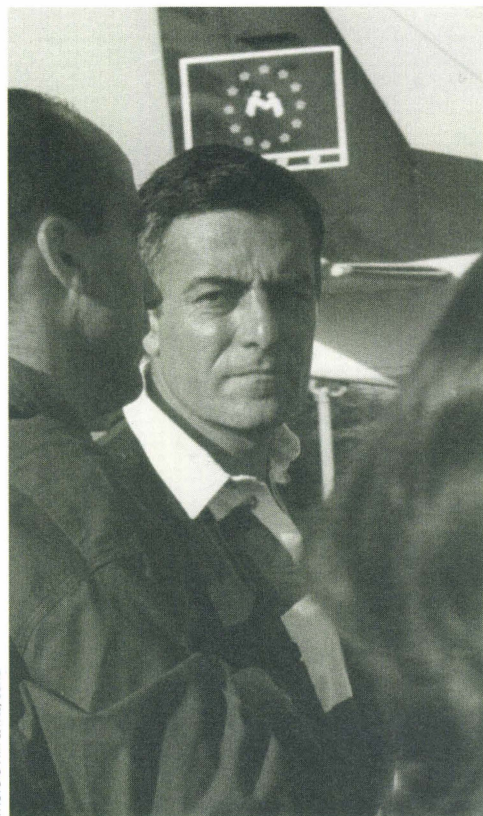


PHOTO © XFEI PAIS/ECHO

ECHO News: ECHO has been making headlines for weeks over allegations of fraud. What's the problem? What are you doing about it?

AN: It's sad that we've attracted so much attention for the wrong reasons after our success in supporting so many humanitarian aid operations since we started in 1992. Yes, there are indeed allegations of fraud. They result from an investigation launched by UCLAF, the Commission's Fraud Squad, into four contracts signed in 1993/94, covering monitoring operations in Bosnia and Africa. In July this year, UCLAF found evidence to support allegations

that an official benefited personally from the use of ECHO funds. The Commission suspended the official in question, and turned over the documents to public investigators in Luxembourg. The matter is now sub judice, but I should point out that the amount in question is about ECU 600,000, not the millions seen in many headlines. Nevertheless, when we are confronted with a case of fraud, the amount is not the point. Whether big or small, it is always too much, and totally unacceptable.

ECHO News: But is it true that those contracts were supposed to cover work in the field, and paid for staff in Brussels instead?

Yes. In 1993 and 1994, ECHO was faced with two major crises at the same time—the massacre in Rwanda and war in ex-Yugoslavia. It simply didn't have enough back-room staff in Brussels to cope with the contracts it was dealing with. So officials tried to get around restrictions on hiring permanent officials by using part of the operational budget to take on extra temporary staff - the so-called 'submarines' you have read about in the press—to deal with a crisis on an ad hoc basis. The Commission acknowledges that the acrobatics involved amount to bending administrative rules. That is regrettable, but it is not fraud. Moreover, ECHO did not divert funds that would have been otherwise have paid for aid intended for victims of humanitarian disasters. All the same, it seems that an official may have attempted to take advantage of the situation personally, and he now has to answer charges of fraud on his own account.

ECHO News: Many of the articles say ECHO's management of public funds is lax. Do you have controls on spending, and if so, how do you implement them?

Of course we have controls on funding, just like all Commission departments managing public funds. Just because ECHO is managing emergency aid does not mean it is exempt from controls. Humanitarian aid, by its very

nature, must be managed with total integrity, to the highest possible standards. Without it, we risk the erosion of funding and support through 'donor fatigue'. Every request for funding is subject to close scrutiny in-house, by desk officers and by ECHO's in-house financial unit. The Commission's Financial Control Department has to approve all applications and payments, and checks procedures were carried out correctly after the event. ECHO also carries out audits of its partners. Since 1995, these have covered 82 percent of ECHO's operational funds, including those relevant to 1992-95. Independent consultants frequently carry out evaluations of operations at the request of a special ECHO unit. The Commission's General Inspectorate of Services, the Court of Auditors and Financial Control also carry out verifications. Partners have to keep receipts for five years, available for inspection by the Commission or Court of Auditors. In fact, non-governmental organisations often complain that ECHO does too many evaluations, too many audits, that there's too much bureaucracy and that they have to do too many financial reports for us. That does not square at all with recent press reports of lax accounting. If anyone has suggestions as to how we could be more transparent in our dealings and still deal with emergencies promptly and flexibly, I would like to hear from them.

ECHO News: So how would ECHO cope if another crisis on the scale of the Rwanda massacre were to break out?

With great difficulty. We now have just over 100 staff, but it's not enough to deal with the increasing numbers of conflicts and disasters all over the world. We no longer take on 'submarines', but there is no proper system for hiring extra staff to deal with urgent short-term projects. We need a more flexible system of the kind recommended by the Court of Auditors in its special report on humanitarian aid, so that permanent staff can be reinforced when necessary without the kind of risky bureaucratic acrobatics that happened in 1993 and 1994.

ECHO TV and radio awards 1998

The awards for the third year of the annual ECHO TV and radio awards took place in Vienna on 3 December.

The shortlist for 1998 and the winners (in *italics*) are as follows.

Broadcast commitment

GRI-Zapping, RAI, Italy
Le Magazine de Boudosoa, RFI, France
Snapshots, BBC World Service, UK

People on the Move

Peace Mission Vukovar, Hof Filmproduction, The Netherlands
Fermde Kinder, Kein Zuhayse in Kurdistan, ZDF, Germany
Kisangani Diary, Hubert Sauper, Austria/France

In the Minds of the People

Elena Ceausescu : doctor horris causa, East West Film & TV production and Evangelical Broadcast Organisation, The Netherlands
Getting Away with Murder, Correspondent Special, BBC, UK
Much Reconciliation, Little Justice - videodialogue of enemies, Hof Film productions, The Netherlands

Forgotten Conflicts

Karmapa, Two ways of Divinity, Art Film Production, Finland
Die Sklaverei in Sudan, Sudddeutscher Rundfunk, Fernsehen, Germany
The Bank, The President & the Pearl of Africa : Tug of War, International Broadcasting Trust, UK/France

Vulnerable Groups

Auf der Kippe : Wasteland, Wuste Film production, Germany
Politics do not a Banquet Make, Frame Mediaproducties, the Netherlands
Apartheid's Children, October Films, UK

Radio Award

Studio I Jambo, Burundi
Star Radio, Liberia
B92, Yugoslavia
Talking Drum Radio, Liberia