

# 'Mitch' leaves thousands dead in Central America

By Mike Lanchin  
Catholic News Service

SAN SALVADOR (CNS) — Central American church officials appealed for international humanitarian aid as the remnants of Hurricane Mitch swept through the region.

Government officials said Nov. 2 the storm left at least 1,300 people dead and 500,000 homeless, but warned that the death toll could exceed 7,000.

Pope John Paul II, in a Nov. 2 telegram, offered his prayers for the people of Central America and called on the international community to help the victims.

The pope was "deeply saddened to learn of the devastating effects of the hurricane which struck Nicaragua and other areas of Central America causing numerous deaths and injuries and serious material damage, leaving many families homeless," said the telegram signed by the Vatican secretary of state.

"His Holiness exhorts institutions and all people of good will, motivated by sentiments of fraternal solidarity and Christian charity, to offer effective aid to overcome these difficult moments," the telegram said.

The message, signed by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, was sent to Archbishop Luigi Travaglini, the Vatican nuncio in Nicaragua.

Widespread flooding destroyed whole villages, roads, bridges and houses, as the storm hit Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala in late October.

One of the worst hit areas was in Nicaragua where heavy rains caused the collapse of the Casita volcano in the western province of Chinandega. Mudslides plowed through two villages, killing an estimated 1,000-1,500 inhabitants.

Only 120 survivors were found out of a population of 1,800 in the region of the volcano, according to local officials.

The Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, was turned into a floating city as the Choluteca river broke its banks, sending torrents of water crashing through the city.

Among the more than 300 casualties was Tegucigalpa's mayor, Cesar Castellanos, who died when the helicopter in which he was flying over the disaster zone crashed into electricity lines.

Around 30 percent of all housing in the city was destroyed by the flooding, according to news reports.

Archbishop Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa called Nov. 1 for the "reconstruction of the capital" and stressed the need for international relief assistance.

Similar calls for help were made from Managua, Nicaragua, by Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo.

In El Salvador, more than 70 people were reported killed and some 22,000 left homeless. The worst affected areas were in the east and central regions. Eight bridges were reported collapsed.

People were evacuated from the worst hit areas to churches and community halls in major cities.

The Jesuit run radio station, YSUCA, was broadcasting calls for help from around the country, before the first helicopters managed to get through to the most isolated regions.

Staff and volunteers at the station were collecting food and clothing late Oct. 31, in response to the nationwide call for help launched by the government, church and private sector.

Part of the donations were being sent to neighboring Honduras.



Reuters/CNS

**A mother carries her child as she makes her way through flood waters in San Cristobal, Honduras, Oct. 31. Catholic Charities of Miami began collecting food, supplies and cash donations for the Central American victims of Hurricane Mitch. Hundreds of thousands were left homeless after the devastating storm.**

At its peak Oct. 27, Mitch was the fourth-strongest Caribbean hurricane in this century, with 180-mph winds.

Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa

Chavez of San Salvador told reporters Nov. 2, "We never thought this storm would come at us with such strength.

"It would be good if the (initial) aid does not stop. It's a good sign that the rest of the country has come to the aid of those affected. But we hope these are not passing sentiments, but reflect a deep willingness to begin the reconstruction and renovation of the lives destroyed so that people can live again in dignity," he added.

First reports from Guatemala were that some 30,000 people were left homeless and more than 20 killed as the storm, converted into tropical depression, entered the country Nov. 1.

Archbishop Rodriguez told Catholic News Service Oct. 29 in a telephone interview from Tegucigalpa that the church has been working through parish committees, in liaison with government emergency services, organizing collections of food, medicines, clothing and other basic needs.

"There is a lot of suffering, but also a great deal of cooperation, despite the poverty of these people," he noted.

But he expressed concern for the long-term effects on a country where an estimated 70 percent of the population lives in poverty.

"Once the immediate dangers pass the acts of solidarity are less frequent, and that's precisely the moment when most help will be required," he said.

The Diocese of Rochester and Catholic Charities are advising people interested in contributing aid to send checks, marked for Central America hurricane relief and payable to Catholic Relief Services, to CRS, 209 W. Fayette St., Baltimore, MD, 21201. Anyone with questions may call 800-235-2772.

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