

Bishops urge broad Central American relief efforts

By Mike Lanchin
Catholic News Service

SAN SALVADOR — Central America's bishops have urged their governments to go beyond the "simple reconstruction" of their countries in the wake of Hurricane Mitch and to "attack extreme poverty ... (and) build a new Central America."

In a statement issued at the end of a four-day meeting late last month in the Salvadoran capital, the 29 members of the Central American Episcopal Secretariat added their voices to growing calls for a vast reconstruction and development program in the areas worst-hit by Mitch.

In addition, Pope John Paul II directed the Vatican charitable agency, "Cor Unum," to undertake a special mission in countries affected by Hurricane Mitch. In the United States and Canada, bishops' relief and development agencies said they had received good response to appeals for donations for the hurricane victims.

One response is from a Finger Lakes area team that flew to Honduras Nov. 29 to offer medical assistance.

Led by Eric Lewis, a parishioner of St. Stephen's Church, Geneva, and community health educator for the Finger Lakes Migrant Health Care Project, the team consisted of: Terry Yonker, RN, Wayne County Public Health and parishioner at St. Michael's, Penn Yan; Father Peter Deckman, co-administrator, St. Michael's; and Terri Hannan, clinical coordinator at Hobart and William Smith Colleges' Hubbs Health Center, and a parishioner at St. Stephen's; Sally Howe, of East Bloomfield Migrant Education; Donna Achilles, RN, of Hobart and William Smith; and Patricia Rios and Susan Ernhout, RN, both of the migrant program.

Most of the team members are scheduled to be in Honduras until Dec. 9.



Reuters/CNS
A homeless girl stands in the mud beside a stream in the village of Los Llanitos near Choluteca in southern Honduras Nov. 20. Her village was wiped out in flooding from Hurricane Mitch in late October.

The Central American bishops said the hurricane, which struck in early November, "revealed a number of unresolved problems in Central America: the concentration of land in a few hands, the economic model, the environmental deterioration (and) the low value given to human life."

"These unacceptable realities demand a determined response ... not just in helping at the moment of the disaster, but also preventing (future) disasters by creating safe and dignified living conditions," they said.

The bishops reiterated the sentiments of a Nov. 19 statement from the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, saying, "The present stage (in reconstruction)

should not be to repeat the same injustices and suffering of the past, but should be a determined step forward."

That step should include canceling the foreign debt of the worst-hit nations, Nicaragua and Honduras, a central demand of both governments, said the Central American bishops.

If the funds saved by debt cancellation "are to be used to improve the living conditions of the poor," then each government should "adopt an ethical commitment to fight extreme poverty, attack corruption ... implement daring social policies and develop strategies for preventing future disasters," the bishops said.

More than 11,000 people died and another 3 million were left homeless after Mitch's rampage across the region. Flash floods and mudslides created chaos in the

local economies and destroyed roads, housing, bridges and valuable export crops, particularly in Honduras and Nicaragua.

The death toll has continued to rise as diseases spread because of contaminated drinking water and unclean conditions.

As of Nov. 23, Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency, had approved more than \$1.3 million in cash for immediate relief efforts in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Contributing to this story were Lynne Weil at the Vatican and Kathleen Schwarz.

Local donations are being accepted by Honduras Relief, c/o Finger Lakes Migrant Health, 2 Rubin Dr., Rushville, NY 14544. Checks also may be sent to Catholic Relief Services, 209 W. Fayette St., Baltimore, MD, 21201.

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