

STRIFE IN HONDURAS

Hope rises but hunger reigns

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Nelson Geovani sits on a railroad track on an banana plantation near the village of San Isidro. (Gary Landers photo)

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EL PROGRESO, Honduras - Even the trees seem as if they're crying in Honduras.

Brown and broken, weeping willows droop over the Rio Ulua.

Chocolate-colored water offers the only route to villages of families trapped on banana plantations three weeks after Hurricane Mitch ravaged this Central American country.

San Isidro villagers fled to the Naranjo Chino banana camp of Cincinnati-based Chiquita Brands International after three days of rain caused the swollen Rio Ulua to break through levies. Now, their sanctuary has turned into islands of rotting bananas, dead animals and mosquito-infested ponds.

For these villagers and an estimated 1.4 million homeless Hondurans, misery congealed the day the rain stopped. They are becoming increasingly desperate for staples, such as food, clothing and housing. International relief workers, churches and the government scramble to feed and clothe a displaced population about the size of metropolitan Cincinnati.

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RELIEF
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The destruction of roads, bridges and crops makes it all the harder.

"Right now, help is getting to most of the people," said Honduran Army First Lt. Roosevelt Leonel Hernandez before arriving at the Chiquita banana camp. "But we know in the future there's going to be hunger. It's going to be very difficult to find food."

Cincinnati-based Shoulder to Shoulder Inc. has enlisted the Tristate area to help. For the next year, the nonprofit group will ask Tristate schools and churches to fill containers the size of a semi-trailer with food, clothing and medical supplies.

The goods will be shipped by Chiquita boats to help three areas:

- The state of Yoro, where El Progreso is the largest city.
- La Lima, the base of Chiquita's subsidiary, Tela Railroad Co.
- Santa Lucia in the state of Intibuca, where Shoulder established a clinic six years ago.



**Residents of La Lima live in makeshift housing along the main road.
(Gary Landers photo)**

The Tristate area already is responding to the call for help. Students and teachers in Wyoming schools Friday sent a container full of food and 160 boxes of medical supplies.

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At Chiquita's Naranjo Chino banana camp, San Isidro villagers live in three abandoned tractor-trailer containers, next to mangled train tracks that once carried bananas to the coast.

Mattresses fill the former packing house. The shelter is so cramped that someone has hung a hammock from an upper rafter. Women scrub clothes where bananas usually are washed.

And everywhere, there's mud.

A teen-age boy cuts through an area so thick with mud it reaches his waist. Elsewhere, the mud squishes through the toes of shoeless young children and splashes on the boots of the men. A brown water line near the roofs of the few remaining homes shows how high the flood water got before it receded.

Green fields of lush banana trees have turned into acres of brown stubs with contorted limbs.

Mosquitoes begin biting at dusk.

A sewer-like stench never leaves.

Villagers want out.

But on this day, Lt. Hernandez couldn't take them. The Army was supposed to begin ferrying the trapped residents on the east bank of the Rio Ulua across to the west bank, where they could be picked up in trucks and driven to El Progreso.

Those plans were changed at the last minute by the Emergency Commission, the relief effort headed by the Roman Catholic Church and which includes the Honduran military and Protestant churches. Instead, the commission wanted an update on health conditions to see whether

the villagers could stay. So Lt. Hernandez brought doctors with him to report to the commission.

Not enough

The villagers have clean water from the camp's well. Food is brought to them every 10 days from relief workers.

"Tomorrow, we're going to bring more food," he told them. But the 360 villagers make it clear its not enough.

Roberto Arias said the share he receives barely feeds his wife and eight children. The small corn, beans and plantain crops the villagers grew for themselves before Hurricane Mitch washed away in the flood.

The shortage of food is apparent by children's bloated stomachs and rust-colored hair, signs of malnutrition.

"Most people in the village lost everything," Mr. Arias said. Their houses, made of wooden poles and tin, corrugated roofs, were reduced to rubble. What had been a meager existence turned into desperation.

The villagers at the banana plantation had waited 15 days before relief arrived. To survive, they ate bananas. Some days they braved the current on makeshift barges made of banana tree stalks and floated to the few remaining rooftops, where they rescued stranded chickens for meals.

Many villagers will need to rely on relief efforts for months, if not years, because crops have been destroyed and no work exists. Half the villagers were permanent workers for Chiquita and are eligible to receive a portion of their pay; the other half, like Mr. Arias, were temporary workers who don't ordinarily receive benefits.

Relief efforts so far have been focused on keeping people fed and healthy. But the plight of San Isidro and other homeless Hondurans illustrates what a long, painful process it might be.

Linda Elvir, a volunteer from El Progreso, erupted in frustration when she learned that the Army brought inspectors and doctors instead of following through the plan to take the villagers to a safer location. The banana camp was reduced to a cesspool of mosquitoes and breeding grounds for malaria. The people need to be brought to El Progreso, where shelters in schools are safe and clean, she said.

"All these people are coming to look at the people but are not bringing help," Mrs. Elvir said.

"For 21 days they've been sleeping here in cartons only covering themselves with cardboard and banana leaves," she said, sobbing. "The people are feeling like they are inside a show window. All these people

are passing by taking pictures, but (the villagers) are not receiving the help they're supposed to get."

Moving to El Progreso

The movement of the villagers to El Progreso will be harder, because the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps and its 15 inflatable boats left Thursday.

The corps had carried more than 5,500 pounds of food, water and supplies to the stranded villagers for 10 days from the banks of the Rio Ulua in El Progreso.

"For us it was frustrating bringing food to one side of the river and on the other side people were waving, and asking us to bring them food," said Sgt. Major Ben Lak, as troops behind him loaded gear on trucks and prepared to leave the ground where they slept for more than a week.

Immediately after the storm, 100,000 homeless people crowded into schools and shelters in El Progreso. To avoid a repeat of Hurricane Fifi in 1974, when the military pocketed relief money, the government has put the Roman Catholic Church in charge of distributing aid.

At the Instituto Technico Loyola, a Jesuit school in El Progreso, the church stores food and supplies shipped in from around the world.

More than 400,000 pounds of rice, the same amount of beans, 960 boxes of donated Chiquita bananas and 150,000 pounds of soy flour fill the gymnasium.

"It's not enough," says Jose Wilfredo Alvarado, a relief worker coordinating the supplies at the school. To adequately feed the villagers in the camps, they say they need to triple what they already have.

"The main problem we have is how to get to those places. The Dutch marines left and took all the boats with them," Mr. Alvarado says. "It would be much easier to bring the people here to feed them, but we need more food to do that."

Roads and bridges

The food shortage will continue to be a problem even in areas that weren't as badly damaged by the storm.

The storm not only destroyed the plantations, but also personal fields and gardens so the people cannot count on home-grown food. Mitch also ripped major highways, isolating villages and shutting down transportation that would either help the homeless relocate or allow food, clothing and medicine to get to them quickly.

In many villages, helicopters and boats are still carrying supplies to the stranded and homeless.

Residents of small towns worry the government will have to focus on urban areas first. The nation's capital and most populous city, Tegucigalpa, was hard hit by Mitch. So was San Pedro Sula, the second-largest city. For those people who have money and live where food is available, prices are soaring.

Santa Lucia, a poor southwest city that is home to the Shoulder to Shoulder clinic, was spared the worst of the storm. Still, Hurricane Mitch destroyed the local bean farms that fed 75 percent of the city, Mayor Daniel Claros said.

In the first two weeks after the hurricane, the price of beans jumped almost 100 percent, from 350 lempiras, or \$26, for 100 pounds of beans, to 600 lempiras, or \$46.

Even when times were good, people would try to sell the beans in El Salvador for a better price, Mr. Claros said. He's afraid that trend could escalate in the coming months.

"Even if they have the money, people aren't going to be able to find beans," he said.

Landslides all over Honduras turned fatal to terrified people living in poor mountain neighborhoods above Tegucigalpa, as well as rural villages.

Maria Rodriguez realized the mudslides were starting when her 6-year-old cousin's bed began slipping off a mountain.

The screams of the boy woke Maria's aunt and uncle, who grabbed their son and ran to Maria's house next door. As 17-year-old Maria and her family escaped to the shelter of a neighbor's home, her cousin's house fell off the cliff.

"I was so scared, there was nothing else to do but cry," Maria said.

After the rains stopped, the landslides put a stranglehold on the relief and rescue effort, travel and commerce because they closed so many highways.

Highway 1 is the main road between Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula in the northwest. In Maria's neighborhood, north of Santa Cruz de Yojoa, two landslides on Highway 1 are forcing travelers to detour to secondary roads.

The rains also wiped out bridges along the highway. Cars and trucks now carve detours on rocky terrain through the Las Minas River. The walls of the bridge above it lie in crumbs amid a cracked foundation. In other places, passengers leave buses on one side of fragile bridges, carrying babies and grocery bags to the other side where they reboard the bus.

Villages in the northern state of Yoro remain cut off. U.S. Marine Corps

helicopters have been carrying food to remote towns there. "This is something we've never seen before," said Honduran Army Major Jorge Alvarenga, assigned to the city and county of El Progreso.

Garbage yields hope

Strips of fabric are the prize in a field outside La Lima. Garbage trucks dump loads in the field where hundreds of people swarm through the piles and climb up into the trucks' trash bins.

"Most people don't have anything, only the clothing they're wearing," says Marvin Reyes, who watches the spectacle. Mr. Reyes, a farmer from Mangulile, has come to nearby El Progreso to buy fertilizer before Hurricane Mitch. Now he can't get home because the roads are closed.

"They have to come here like dogs and look through the trash for something they can use," says Alfredo Perez, a former El Progreso businessman whose ice cream stand was washed out in the floods. The trucks dump the cloth left over from a La Lima fabric company that was flooded.

Miriam Mazariegos and her sister Neria hold up pieces of blue material from three bags of cloth they take from the dump. They hope to make shirts for Miriam's three children and mop heads to clean the mud out of their homes.

In La Lima, whose banana fields resemble the brown, cracked deserts across the Ulua River in El Progreso, housing is another problem.

As in El Progreso, storm waters covered La Lima and reached tree tops after the Ulua and Chamelecon rivers joined.

Residents who were forced out of their homes have set up plastic shacks along major roadways, using tin roofs they have recovered from destroyed neighborhoods to help build their shelters. They ride bicycles caked in mud, a display of their attempts to get back to their old houses.

Relief workers urgently need more construction material so they can provide shelter.

Lucitana Hernandez used to grow and sell plantains before Mitch destroyed her small patch of land and her house. Her two grandchildren, ages 5 and 3, were visiting from Washington, D.C., when the storm hit.

She now lives with the children in a roadside shack near La Lima, in San Manuel.

"I don't have money to send them back," Mrs. Hernandez said.

Helplessly waiting

Daniel Castro, director of the Christian Medical Society of Honduras, which works with the relief commission, recalls the first days of the relief effort.

"It was a sense of impotency and helplessness," Mr. Castro said. "All we could do was cry."

A month later, that's the same feeling Lt. Hernandez has when he orders his crew to pull away from the banana plantation. He can't bring the villagers to a safer place. All of them must wait a while longer as the brown river slowly recedes and the relief commission decides what to do with them.

The San Isidro villagers stand on the bank and stare.

A few children wave and call out, "Adios."

The boat heads up river, leaving behind the stranded villagers, the rotting bananas and the weeping willows.