

Honduran jobs dry up

Crumbling economy now in landslide

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LIMA, Honduras - Men who once swung machetes through fields now swing on hammocks in homeless shelters.

Stranded banana workers sit idly on flooded plantations.

Displaced villagers clean the streets of mud-soaked towns in exchange for food.

Hurricane Mitch killed more than 6,000 Hondurans alone and displaced almost 1.4 million people - a population roughly the size of metropolitan Cincinnati. But more than that, it left in tatters the economy of what already was the third-poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.



As major Honduran cities begin to bustle again, millions of people in outlying regions are left without jobs or any way to rebuild this Central American country.

Even before Hurricane Mitch, the rate of unemployment and underemployment here was 45 percent.

Those ranks swelled when four days of rain washed out about 70 percent of the country's crops.

Agriculture provides jobs for about two-thirds of the labor force. It makes up the same amount of the country's exports. That coupled with the country's \$4 billion in foreign debt leaves it virtually helpless to pull out of this alone.

Because officials forecast that it will take another 18 months to plant and harvest major crops, workers could be jobless for a long time unless a massive infusion of money arrives from the international community.

"People are not on the roofs anymore, but there's still an emergency," says Jose Matilde Sigaran, referring to the first days of the hurricane when flooded villagers sought refuge atop their homes.

Mr. Sigaran is a volunteer at the Instituto Technico Loyola, which is a

Jesuit school in El Progreso in the northern state of Yoro.

Cincinnati-based Shoulder to Shoulder Inc. is targeting Yoro, as well as La Lima and Santa Lucia, for Cincinnatians to help during the next year.

The Roman Catholic Church, leading the country's relief mission, is using the school to warehouse food and supplies for the region's shelters.

About 112 families made up of about 1,000 people rescued from the banana plantations north of El Progreso seek refuge here. The center pays shelter dwellers with food to help clean the mud and dirt that lines every street, filling the air with a brown, choking mist.

But the program isn't enough.

Jaiiro Evangelista Castro lost all his belongings in the floods but has a place to live. He hopes the institute's food-for-work program can be extended for people like him, but there's only enough food for those in the shelters.

A construction worker, Mr. Evangelista wants to help, but he needs to be paid.

"I can work, I would like to do it, but I'm not receiving food for it," he says.

Temporary workers hit

Genaro Rodriguez used to support his wife and nine kids by rotating to different jobs every three months on various banana plantations.

If his was a shoestring existence before, it is now hanging by a thread. As temporary workers, Mr. Rodriguez says he and half of the 360 San Isidro villagers stranded on Chiquita Brands International's Naranjo Chino banana plantation can't get benefits as permanent workers can.

The Cincinnati-based company has promised to give its 7,000 workers in Honduras full wages, housing and other benefits for the next three months.

"I don't have any idea what I'm going to do," Mr. Rodriguez says, standing in mud-splashed boots at the camp, north of El Progreso. "We're willing to work, we have two hands and can plant beans, corn and rice. But right now, we don't have a place to go. We don't know what to do."

Steve Warshaw, president and chief operating officer for Chiquita, says the company is helping anyone who needs it and has provided medical care for 10,000 people in Honduras since Mitch hit. Only 2,500 of those people were Chiquita employees or family members, Mr. Warshaw said.

Jose Mazariegos, an employee for Tela Railroad Co., Chiquita's subsidiary, had worked at its Mopala banana camp near La Lima before Hurricane Mitch struck.

Digging through trash for clothes at a La Lima dump, he says he is looking forward to a December bonus. After Christmas, he said he was told he will receive a cash advance that will amount to \$43 every 15 days from Tela Railroad.

That amounts to about \$2.80 a day, a little less than his regular pay of about \$4 a day. However, he said he has to pay some of the money back after work resumes on the plantations. Chiquita estimates the next banana crops will not be ready for harvest until the year 2000. Mr. Mazariegos says he expects the money Tela Railroad advances him will be taken out of his paychecks.

Mr. Warshaw confirms that employees might need to repay a small "portion" of the cash advances to the company later on. But he adds that the benefits making up the majority of what workers are receiving during the crisis - namely, housing, medicine and utilities - are all at the company's expense.

"Our objective is the same as everyone there," Mr. Warshaw says. "We'd like to get them back to work as soon as we can."

Still, the largest portion of new banana crops probably won't be ready for harvest for about 18 months.

Until the ground is ready for replanting of banana trees, a small number of Chiquita employees can be put back to work on plantations that were not destroyed and can be rehabilitated, Mr. Warshaw says. Chiquita has already said it is committed to staying in Honduras, even though it lost about \$100 million and 90 percent of its crop. The company grows about 10 percent of its bananas in Honduras.

"Everyone within the country and outside the country needs to focus on putting these people back to work," Mr. Warshaw says.

Moves north expected

Without the work, residents likely will head north to the United States as illegal immigrants, Honduran first lady Mary Flores predicts.

Mrs. Flores, a former Cincinnati, is asking the United States to change its deportation policies toward Honduran residents.

Although there was no armed conflict in Honduras during the 1980s, Mrs. Flores says, the country was just as devastated as its warring neighbors because their troops were trained by the U.S. government on Honduran soil.

Refugees in war-torn El Salvador and Nicaragua flocked into Honduras during U.S.-funded civil wars in the 1980s, taking jobs and forcing many Hondurans to head to the United States, she says.

"Though there was no armed conflict here, we received the consequences," Mrs. Flores says. "Deporting them is just putting more tragedy upon us and makes America look like they don't care by sending more and more people back when we're trying to do the best we can with the people here."

Near the border with El Salvador, some villages around Santa Lucia have no men in them. Many of the men have been gone for years, working in the United States and sending money home, says Dr. Miguel Coello, a Honduran doctor employed by the Shoulder to Shoulder clinic in Santa Lucia.

But many men stay behind and travel each year to work in the coffee plantations across the border in El Salvador or in the sugar plantations in northern Honduras, says Santa Lucia Mayor Daniel Claros.

Though these villages high in pyramid-sharp mountains touched by the belly of sagging clouds are far from the worst hurricane damage at the coast, workers here will be hurting for a long time, too.

The destruction of the coffee and sugar cane plantations elsewhere stole jobs from now until February for about half the work force in Santa Lucia, including women and children, Mr. Claros says.

"Now there is no way to provide jobs for the people," Mr. Claros says. That means the villagers won't make any money to plant their own crops through May and June.

"As a mayor, I would like to have projects for people to work, but the economic situation in the municipalities is so bad, we don't have the money."

Daniel Castro, the national director of the Christian Medical Society of Honduras, says his country needs to strive for conditions that were better than they were when the hurricane decimated the nation.

"We are talking right now about a new Honduras," Mr. Castro says. "We were set back 50 years. Now we need to build a better country."