

QUESTION AND ANSWER SERIES

HONDURAS

HARDSHIP CONSIDERATIONS

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Question and Answer Series papers are one means by which information on human rights conditions in a country and/or conditions affecting given groups or individuals deemed “at risk” within a given country is presented to Asylum and Immigration Officers. Question and Answer Series papers are brief descriptions of conditions in countries based on information provided by the sources referred to above. They are prepared by expert consultants and/or the staff of the Resource Information Center, Immigration and Naturalization Service, U.S. Department of Justice. Question and Answer papers cannot be, and do not purport to be either exhaustive with regard to the country surveyed, or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

NOTE: Research for this paper was completed on 13 June 1999.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Mitch in late October and early November 1998, Honduras, with a population of about 6.2 million people, was one of the poorest and most unequal countries in Latin America. As a result of the storm, social, economic and environmental conditions worsened substantially throughout the national territory. International aid needed for the enormous task of rebuilding was slow in coming, and the debt-strapped Honduran government appeared to have difficulty in establishing mechanisms for making proper and effective use of it.

Preparatory to the conference on hurricane aid for Central America held in Stockholm on May 25-28, 1999, the government developed a five-year plan for reconstruction, with costs estimated at around \$4 billion. In Stockholm, donor countries and international financial institutions promised to provide up to \$3 billion in various forms of assistance to Honduras over the course of four years. However, as of mid-June 1999, it had yet to be determined when the aid package would fully come on line or how Honduras would absorb it. Meanwhile, with the start of another rainy season and renewed flooding in May, and the potential threat of another hurricane with the approach of summer, most Hondurans remained in a day-to-day struggle merely to subsist.

II. GENERAL CONDITIONS

A. Level of Development

The Human Development Index (HDI) produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provides a broad assessment of relative levels of development among the nations of the world. The HDI considers three basic dimensions—longevity, knowledge, and standard of living—and measures life expectancy, educational attainment and literacy, and income. In the 1998 HDI, Honduras ranked 119th out of 174 countries, as compared to, for example, the United States which ranked fourth and Costa Rica which ranked 34th.¹ Overall, countries fall into one of three categories—high, medium, and low development. At number 119, Honduras is at the low end of medium development, eleven places above the cutoff point for low development.

¹ United Nations Development Program. *Human Development Report 1998* (New York: UNDP and Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 128-130.

In the Western Hemisphere, only two countries are ranked lower than Honduras—Nicaragua (126) and Haiti (159).²

B. Inequality

Honduran society is characterized by extreme social and economic inequality. According to a 1998 study by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), Latin America has the greatest disparities in income distribution in the world. In gauging relative levels of inequality among Latin American countries, the IADB found that only seven countries in the region had greater income disparities than Honduras (Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama and Paraguay).³

According to a UNDP study of Honduras published in November 1998, there are also substantial disparities in levels of income and development among the country's eighteen administrative departments, and among the municipalities within each department. In this regard, the study concluded that Honduras is one of the most "fractured" countries in Latin America.⁴ For example, the central department of Francisco Morazán, which includes the capital city of Tegucigalpa, has an HDI rating nearly twice as high as the western department of Lempira.⁵ At the same time, within Francisco Morazán itself, there are municipalities whose HDI ratings are nearly as low as that of Lempira.⁶ Six of eighteen departments have HDI ratings which place them squarely in the low-development category. All are wedged into the mountainous, mostly rural western quarter of the country along the borders with Guatemala and El Salvador. They are, in descending order: Ocotepeque, La Paz, Santa Bárbara, Copán, Intibucá, and Lempira, which has an HDI rating not much higher than that of Haiti.⁷

² United Nations Development Program. *Human Development Report 1998* (New York: UNDP and Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 128-130.

³ Inter-American Development Bank. *Facing Up to Inequality: Economic and Social Progress in Latin America, 1998-1999 Report* (Washington DC: IADB and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 12-13.

⁴ United Nations Development Program. *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 1998* (Tegucigalpa: UNDP, November 1998), p. 4.

⁵ United Nations Development Program. *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 1998* (Tegucigalpa: UNDP, November 1998), p. 5.

⁶ United Nations Development Program. *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 1998* (Tegucigalpa: UNDP, November 1998), p. 211.

⁷ United Nations Development Program. *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 1998* (Tegucigalpa: UNDP, November 1998), p. 5, 207.

C. Poverty

According to the UNDP, the national poverty rate was 67 percent in 1997, with 32 percent of the population described as “indigent,” or living in extreme poverty. The UNDP found that the rate of extreme poverty increased to 35 percent in rural areas,⁸ where at least 300,000 peasant families remained without land even prior to Hurricane Mitch.⁹ In the mid-1990s, according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the poverty rate was 96 percent in the western rural areas of the country, and the continued migration generally of poor and extremely poor people from rural to urban areas exacerbated already difficult social conditions and overwhelmed weak infrastructure in the cities.¹⁰ According to estimates cited by PAHO, 57 percent of the population lived in rural areas as late as 1995.¹¹ Honduran analysts say that with accelerated migration, however, more than half the population currently lives in urban areas—more than one million alone in Tegucigalpa—with many of the new arrivals squatting in precarious, ramshackle hillside communities or along riverbank flood plains.¹²

D. Income

According to PAHO, annual per capita income was nearly stagnant in the first half of the 1990s, rising from \$702 in 1990 to \$722 in 1995.¹³ The U.S. Department of State estimated that in 1998, prior to Hurricane Mitch, the figure had risen to \$830.¹⁴ As low as those income levels are, they are actually skewed upward because of the huge disparity in income distribution. For example, the UNDP found that in the mid-1990s, 46.5 percent of the population was subsisting on one dollar or less per day.¹⁵ A more recent study by the

⁸ United Nations Development Program. *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 1998* (Tegucigalpa: UNDP, November 1998), p. 3.

⁹ Inforpress Centroamericana. *Honduras: Land Reform and Campesino Organizations* (Guatemala City: IC, January 1999), p. 6.

¹⁰ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 336. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

¹¹ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 332. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

¹² Tamayo, Juan O. and Garvin, Glenn. “Squatter for life,” *Miami Herald* (Miami, FL: 22 November 1998).

¹³ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 331. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

¹⁴ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington, DC: USDOS, 26 February 1999), p.1. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

¹⁵ United Nations Development Program. *Human Development Report 1998* (New York: UNDP and Oxford University Press, 1998), p 147.

World Bank, cited by analysts at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington D.C., indicated that the figure has since risen to nearly 50 percent.¹⁶

A significant portion of the population, possibly as much as a quarter, receives remittances from abroad, mostly from family members living in the United States, and those remittances provide a substantial portion of their income. Honduran analysts recently estimated that remittances from the United States were as high as \$600 million annually, the equivalent of half the national budget.¹⁷

E. Employment

Prior to Hurricane Mitch, combined unemployment and underemployment (work in the informal sector) affected more than half the population. The 1998 IADB study showed that 59 percent of men between ages 25 and 45 worked in the informal sector, while the figure was 60 percent for women in the same age group.¹⁸ In the mid-1990s, according to PAHO, unemployment and underemployment affected 73 percent of young men and 69 percent of young women between the ages of 15, the legal working age, and 19.¹⁹

For the minority of the economically active population who actually worked in the formal sector, the minimum wage scale, effective January 1998, ranged from \$2.12 to \$2.62 in the agriculture sector. The highest minimum wage was in the export sector, \$3.47 per day. According to the U.S. Department of State, minimum wages in both sectors were insufficient to provide a standard of living above the poverty line for a worker and family.²⁰

In 1998, the Honduran Ministry of Labor, human rights groups, and children's rights organizations estimated that 350,000 children below the legal age of 15 were working, with the most significant child labor problems found in the construction industry. Employers were able to exploit child labor and pay underaged workers less than

¹⁶ Rosales, Carlos A. and Scheid, Adrean. "Central America: Starting Over," *HEMISFILE* (La Jolla, CA: January-February 1999), p.1. *HEMISFILE* is a publication of The Institute of the Americas.

¹⁷ Cancio Isla, Wilfredo. "Las remesas a Honduras superan la ayuda por Mitch," *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami, FL: 2 June 1999).

¹⁸ Inter-American Development Bank. *Facing Up to Inequality: Economic and Social Progress in Latin America, 1998-1999 Report* (Washington DC: IADB and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 28.

¹⁹ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998) p. 331. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

²⁰ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: US DOS, 26 February 1999), p.16. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

the legal minimum because the Ministry of Labor was either unable or unwilling to effectively enforce labor regulations.²¹

F. Housing

The housing shortage totaled at least 700,000 dwellings in 1995 (when the population was about 5.5 million), according to PAHO. In urban areas, 64 percent of existing dwellings were deemed inadequate because of overcrowding, 33 percent lacked a regular supply of potable water and 41 percent lacked basic sanitation facilities. In rural areas, only 16 percent of dwellings were considered adequate, more that 81 percent had no access to potable water, excreta disposal systems or electricity.²²

G. Education

According to the 1998 IADB report, the average level of education in Honduras for 25-year-olds is 4.74 years of schooling, placing Honduras in a statistical tie with Nicaragua for the lowest level in Latin America. The average level of schooling for all Honduran adults is actually lower, about 4.1 percent. For the poorest half of the population, the average is 2.7 percent.²³ The rate of illiteracy among persons over 15 years old is 27.3 percent, nearly twice the rate for Latin America overall (14 percent).²⁴ According to estimates cited by PAHO, 60 percent of the economically active population has fewer than three years of schooling.²⁵ According to the IADB, more than a fifth of Hondurans 25 years of age or older have had no schooling whatsoever.²⁶

Although the Honduran government in recent years has increased spending for public education, the needs of many school-aged children were still not being addressed. The government provides free, universal, and compulsory education through the age of

²¹ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: US Department of State, 26 February 1999), p.16. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

²² Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 332. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

²³ Inter-American Development Bank. *Facing Up to Inequality: Economic and Social Progress in Latin America, 1998-1999 Report* (Washington DC: IADB and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 27, 46.

²⁴ Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 12. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

²⁵ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 332. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

²⁶ Inter-American Development Bank. *Facing Up to Inequality: Economic and Social Progress in Latin America, 1998-1999 Report* (Washington DC: IADB and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 46

ten but, according to official estimates, 175,000 children each year fail to receive schooling of any kind.²⁷

H. Health

According to the UNDP, during the years 1990-1995, 31 percent of the population was without access to any health services.²⁸ According to PAHO, the percentage has remained about the same in the second half of the 1990s and, despite increased public spending on health care, there are still only 6.5 physicians and 2.4 professional nurses per 10,000 population.²⁹ PAHO also found that in 1994 the infant mortality rate was 42 per 1,000, as compared to 7.5 per 1,000 in the United States in 1995.³⁰ Life expectancy, which was 64 years in the late 1980s, rose to 67 years in 1993 (69.6 for women and 64.8 for men), as compared to 75.8 years in the United States in 1995.³¹

In 1996, according to PAHO, 33.3 percent of girls and 42.2 percent of boys between the ages of six and nine suffered from chronic malnutrition, about the same as the percentages for that age group ten years earlier. It was also found that the prevalence of low height-for-age (stunted growth) was rising as children grew older: in 1996, the rate was 28.8 percent for 6-year-olds, with rates climbing steadily until reaching 58.9 percent for 9-year-olds. Overall, in 1996, malnutrition affected 26.2 percent of the urban population and 44.6 percent of the rural population. The most serious nutritional problems were found in western rural areas of the country, where the prevalence of chronic malnutrition was 59.5 percent.³²

In February 1999, Honduran health officials expressed concern about the spread of AIDS, stating that there could be as many as 20,000 people infected with the HIV virus, approximately one out of every 100 adults. A preliminary study revealed that in the

²⁷ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: USDOS, 26 February 1999), p.14. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

²⁸ United Nations Development Program. *Human Development Report 1998* (New York: UNDP and Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 147.

²⁹ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 338, 341-342. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

³⁰ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 332. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

³¹ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 334, 507. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

³² Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 333, 336. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

shelters housing victims of Hurricane Mitch, between one and five people in each shelter were HIV positive.³³

I. Disabled Persons

Estimates of the number of disabled persons requiring rehabilitation services range from 270,000 (or 4.4 percent of the population)³⁴ and 300,000 (4.8 percent),³⁵ to as high as 700,000 (11.3 percent).³⁶ Rehabilitation services, even of the most rudimentary kind, are available to less than 10 percent of the disabled population.³⁷ There are no formal barriers to participation by disabled persons in education or employment, but neither are there effective statutory or constitutional protections for them.³⁸ Moreover, Honduran Ministry of Public Health officials in 1 May 1999 stated that in the area of employment, disabled persons experience widespread discrimination both in the public and private sectors.³⁹

J. Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples are at the very bottom of the social order. Comprising about 10 percent of the national population of 6.2 million, they are divided into more than half a dozen culturally differentiated ethnic groups.⁴⁰ The Lenca, one of the largest, and the Maya-Chorti are found in the most impoverished central and western rural areas of the country. The Garífuna (Black Caribs) are found along the Atlantic coastline, while the Miskito live in the coastal region of the eastern-most department of Gracias a Dios. The areas where indigenous peoples live are generally without basic infrastructure or health

³³ "AIDS up, says health official," *Honduras This Week* (Tegucigalpa: 22 February 1999). [Internet] www.marrder.com/htw [Accessed on 6 June 1999].

³⁴ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 334. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

³⁵ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: USDOS, 26 February 1999), p.12. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

³⁶ "Unos 700 mil discapacitados son discriminados por la sociedad," *La Prensa de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: 6 May 1999).

³⁷ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 334. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

³⁸ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: USDOS, 26 February 1999), p.12. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

³⁹ "Unos 700 mil discapacitados son discriminados por la sociedad," *La Prensa de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: 6 May 1999).

⁴⁰ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 332. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999]. *Associated Press* (Tegucigalpa: 1 May 1999).

services.⁴¹ According to PAHO, malnutrition affects 95 percent of the indigenous population below the age of 14; of every 100 indigenous people born, 68 die of infectious diseases; and in 1993, estimated life expectancy was 36 for males and 43 for females, as compared to 67 years for the general population.⁴²

K. Personal Security

Violent crime has steadily increased throughout the 1990s. According to PAHO, the homicide rate nearly doubled from 20.7 per 100,000 population in 1989 to 40 per 100,000 in 1995 and, according to official Honduran figures, the rate of violent crime has continued to rise since then.⁴³ In October 1998, the Honduran government deployed 600 army troops in the country's principal cities (Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and La Ceiba being the three largest) to assist police against surging street crime.⁴⁴ However, widespread frustration at the inability of the security forces to prevent or control crime, and the well-founded perception that corrupt security personnel were complicit in the high crime rate, have led to an increase in and considerable public support for vigilante justice.⁴⁵

Violent crime escalated further after Hurricane Mitch, particularly kidnappings for ransom, and in the first quarter of 1999 the government ordered up to 12,000 additional soldiers to patrol streets throughout the country.⁴⁶ Despite the support of the military, about 30 police officers were killed in confrontations with criminals in the first five months of 1999.⁴⁷ In early 1999, it was reported that the burgeoning private security

⁴¹ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol., II, 1998), p. 332. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

⁴² Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 334. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

⁴³ Pan American Health Organization. *Health in the Americas, 1998 Edition* (Washington, DC: PAHO, Vol. II, 1998), p. 337. [Internet] <www.paho.org/english/country.htm> [Accessed on 10 June 1999]. "12,000 soldados combatirán a la delincuencia en Honduras," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 16 March 1999), published in *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami, FL: 17 March 1999).

⁴⁴ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: USDOS, 26 February 1999), p. 4. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

⁴⁵ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. *Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998* (Washington DC: USDOS, 26 February 1999), p. 4. [Internet] www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/honduras.html [Accessed on 5 June 1999].

⁴⁶ Moreno, Blanca. "Where are the police? - Nation in state of emergency as criminals take over," *Honduras This Week* (Tegucigalpa: 22 March 1999). [Internet] www.marrder.com/htw [Accessed on 6 June 1999]. "12,000 soldados combatirán a la delincuencia en Honduras," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa), published in *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami, FL: 17 March 1999).

⁴⁷ "Ministra de Seguridad - Unos 30 policías han muerto en este año por la delincuencia," *Diario Tiempo* (San Pedro Sula: 6 June 1999).

industry now employed about 64,000 security guards, more than three times the combined total of 18,000 military and police personnel.⁴⁸

III. HURRICANE MITCH

A. Severe Losses

Hurricane Mitch was one of the most lethal and destructive natural disasters ever to hit Honduras. According to the Honduran government, as cited in a May 1999 report by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the hurricane caused the death of 5,657 people (without counting the 8,058 missing), injured another 12,272, and initially affected 1.5 million people (nearly a quarter of the national population). Material losses were estimated at \$3.8 billion, equivalent to 70 percent of gross domestic product, with \$2 billion related to the destruction of social capital and infrastructure, and \$1.8 billion to lost production. The prolonged effects on the economy were expected to result in a 2-to-3-percent decline in gross domestic product for 1999, with consequent drops in employment and income levels.⁴⁹ In June 1999 the *Colegio de Economistas de Honduras* (CEH), Association of Honduran Economists, projected an economic decline of 3 percent in 1999 and a 5 percent contraction in per capita income.⁵⁰

The crucial agricultural sector sustained particularly severe damages, with 29 percent of the country's arable land affected, up to 70 percent of production wiped out, and tens of thousands of people thrown out of work.⁵¹ For example, the flood waters of the Choluteca River which ravaged Tegucigalpa, demolishing 181 entire neighborhoods in that city alone, also wreaked havoc over croplands, livestock, machinery, and farm installations along its winding path to the Pacific Ocean.⁵² Throughout the country, many

⁴⁸ "Ejércitos privados pululan en Honduras," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa), published in *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami: 24 February 1999).

⁴⁹ Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 6. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America. Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras to ask for \$4 billion in aid after Mitch," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 5 April 1999).

⁵⁰ "Bajará el ingreso per cápita y se elevará el desempleo," *Diario Tiempo* (San Pedro Sula: 12 June 1999).

⁵¹ Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 9. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America. Rosales, Carlos A. and Scheid, Adrean. "Central America: Starting Over," *HEMISFILE* (La Jolla, CA: January-February 1999), p.2. *HEMISFILE* is a publication of The Institute of the Americas.

⁵² Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras resignada a la inundaciones," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa), published in *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami: 18 May 1999).

agricultural lands remained underwater for extended periods, damaging not only current but also future harvests.⁵³

More than 1.5 million people suffered property losses, while 441,150 people lost or incurred damage to their homes and were forced to seek shelter with friends, family, or in facilities such as schools and churches.⁵⁴ Hundreds of thousands of people lost access to running water due to damaged or destroyed aqueducts, pipes and wells, and sanitation systems were severely disrupted.⁵⁵ Nearly one-third of the national highway network was affected and more than 100 bridges were destroyed, with the consequent isolation of cities and productive zones.⁵⁶ Nearly 12 percent of the nation's health-care facilities, including the Social Security Institute Hospital, and nearly a quarter of all public school classrooms, were either badly damaged or destroyed.⁵⁷

B. Challenges of Reconstruction

The Honduran government, strapped by debt and hobbled by high levels of corruption, was able to provide only minimal relief to citizens during the first seven months after the hurricane. Prior to the disaster, it already was \$80 million behind in payments on a foreign debt of approximately \$3.9 billion.⁵⁸ In January 1999, the Paris Club of nineteen industrialized nations, including the United States, wrote off about two-thirds of the debt owed to them by Honduras, freeing up more than \$400 million which was to go to hurricane reconstruction.⁵⁹ In April, however, the government announced

⁵³ Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 9. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

⁵⁴ Government of Honduras. *Master Plan for National Reconstruction and Transformation (Condensed Version)* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 3. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

⁵⁵ Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 10. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

⁵⁶ Taylor Seeman, Bruce. "Peligran las labores para recuperar a Honduras del paso del huracán Mitch," *Miami Herald* (Tegucigalpa: 14 February 1999). Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 9. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

⁵⁷ Inter-American Development Bank. *Central America After Hurricane Mitch: The Challenge of Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity* (Stockholm: 25-28 May 1999), p. 10. Document presented to the Consultative Group Meeting for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America.

⁵⁸ Darling, Juanita. "Storm-Battered Nicaragua, Honduras Get Debt Relief," *Los Angeles Times* (Tegucigalpa: 8 January 1999).

⁵⁹ Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras has no means to service external debt," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 14 April 1999).

that it still was unable to meet debt-service payments and was having trouble meeting the public-sector payroll.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, key rebuilding tasks were not being undertaken. For example, the hurricane left the country's rivers and other waterways clogged with sediment, rock, and the remains of trees, and therefore prone to even worse flooding in the future. In mid-May, however, the government said that it could not afford the estimated \$180 million cost of dredging, and with the start of the rainy season a few weeks later, a new round of flooding began.⁶¹ In one instance, flood waters in the southwest department of Valle swept over temporary earthen dikes and stopped traffic for days at a time along the Pan American highway, a critical trade artery between Honduras and El Salvador.⁶²

There is also the problem of deforestation, which was gauged at nearly 70 percent before the hurricane and, coupled with poor environmental management, was a principal reason the effects of Mitch were so severe.⁶³ Up to 100,000 hectares of forestland, or approximately a quarter million acres, are lost annually to fires, many of which are set by small farmers in need of land. Widespread soil erosion caused by the hurricane further undermined the remaining ground cover, but reforestation programs look to be even more costly than dredging rivers and will take far longer.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, in the first half of 1999, tens of thousands of people were returning to flood-prone areas around the country and rebuilding ramshackle dwellings because, as one woman said to *Reuters*, "We don't have anywhere else to go."⁶⁵ In April, city officials in Tegucigalpa said that an estimated 100,000 people, about 10 percent of the city's population, needed to be evacuated from high-risk areas before the start of the rainy season. The city has 18 flood or landslide zones where people have built *barrios precarios*, precarious communities, and bodies are discovered almost every day during the rainy season, according to the fire department. The cost of indemnifying people for land and property in those areas was estimated at about \$350 million. Federal government

⁶⁰ Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras has no means to service external debt," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 14 April 1999).

⁶¹ Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras resignada a las inundaciones," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 18 May 1999).

⁶² Galdamez, Luis. "Central American rains aggravate hurricane damage," *Reuters* (Nacaome, Honduras: 24 May 1999.) Ayala Silva, Francisco. "Otra ruptura de Panamericana," *El Diario de Hoy* (San Salvador: 7 June 1999).

⁶³ Rosales, Carlos A. and Scheid, Adrean. "Central America: Starting Over," *HEMISFILE* (La Jolla, CA: January-February 1999), p.2. *HEMISFILE* is a publication of The Institute of the Americas.

⁶⁴ "Incendios forestales destruyen más de 4 mil 300 hectáreas," *ACAN-EFE* (Tegucigalpa), published in *La Prensa de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: 12 April 1999).

⁶⁵ Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras se alista para los huracanes," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 2 June 1999).

officials, however, said such funds were not available and simply issued advisories warning people of the risks.⁶⁶

The government also had difficulty in repairing basic infrastructure. For example, in June 1999, officials warned that Tegucigalpa faced the threat of explosions due to severe cracks and obstructions in the city's sewer system caused by the hurricane. The manager of the National Aqueduct and Sewerage Network Service said, "There are tanks full of fecal matter that could explode because of the gases being produced and the pressure of more incoming material." At the same time, because of blocked or damaged underground pipelines, urine and fecal matter were running openly through the streets of the capital, heightening the risk of epidemics.⁶⁷ Reported cases of cholera and dengue fever were already on the increase by early 1999, in the capital as well in a number of other areas of the country. In early May, the government issued a nationwide cholera alert.⁶⁸ In June, officials said that in the first five months of the year there had been 800 confirmed cases of dengue fever in the northern region of the country alone.⁶⁹

Almost 60 percent of Hondurans derive their living from farming, and agricultural experts forecast that it would up to two years for harvests to return to normal in many areas, particularly where it took weeks and in some places more than a month for flood waters to recede, as happened in the region along the northern coast and in the Mosquitia region in the eastern department of Gracias a Dios.⁷⁰ Banana plantations, for example, were devastated by Mitch, thousands of banana workers were laid off, and major growers such as Chiquita Brands International projected that this critical industry would not be back on its feet until early 2001.⁷¹ For small farmers, the problem was the quality of soil on once flooded lands. In some areas, receding waters left behind layers of sand or

⁶⁶ Palencia, Gustavo. "Honduras se alista para los huracanes," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 2 June 1999). Casa Alianza. "Honduras, Post Hurricane Mitch Damage" (Tegucigalpa: 19 April 1999). [Internet] www.casa-alianza.org/EN/lmn/archive/briefnews.shtml [Accessed 9 June 1999]. Tamayo, Juan O. and Garvin, Glenn. "Squatter for life," *Miami Herald* (Miami, FL: 22 November 1998).

⁶⁷ Palencia, Gustavo. "Fecal explosion threatens Honduran capital," *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa: 9 June 1999).

⁶⁸ "Alerta sanitaria a nivel nacional por casos de cólera," *La Prensa de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: 7 May 1999). "Hondureños vacacionan en áreas contaminadas," *Agence France Presse* (Tegucigalpa), published in *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami, FL: 30 March 1999).

⁶⁹ "Reportan 800 casos de dengue clásico," *La Tribuna* (Tegucigalpa: 10 June 1999).

⁷⁰ Griffin, Wendy. "Honduran agricultural recovery slower than anticipated," *Honduras This Week* (Tegucigalpa: 10 May 1999). [Internet] www.marrder.com/htw [Accessed 6 June 1999].

⁷¹ "Frutos de rehabilitación de fincas de banano comenzarán a aflorar en enero del año 2001," *Diario Tiempo* (San Pedro Sula: 21 May 1999).

infertile muck, sometimes as thick as six feet. In other places, currents washed away top soil or stripped it of nutrients.⁷²

While lack of funding proved to be a major obstacle to reconstruction, there was also the question of whether the government was capable of effectively making use of whatever international assistance became available. In the annual corruption index produced in 1998 by Transparency International, Honduras was rated the third-most corrupt country in the world after Cameroon and Paraguay.⁷³ In March 1999, Leo Valladares, the *Comisionado Nacional de Derechos Humanos* (CONADEH), National Human Rights Commissioner, issued an interim report on the use of limited foreign aid which had arrived in the first months after the hurricane. He found numerous instances of mismanagement and referred 17 cases of alleged corruption to the office of the attorney general. Rather than address the problem, the government tried to retaliate against Valladares by moving to cut short his term, but backed down in the face of international protests.⁷⁴

Concerns about corruption in all Central American countries caused the donor nations and international financial institutions who met in Stockholm in May 1999 to condition reconstruction assistance on transparent accounting and the involvement of civil society to ensure against government mismanagement. The Honduran government committed itself to abiding by those terms, but there was much skepticism among ordinary citizens as well as civic and religious institutions.⁷⁵ Even if the assistance is utilized effectively, it will still require years, probably an entire generation, before Honduras can climb back just to where it was before Hurricane Mitch.

⁷² Lo más preocupante es lo que Mitch le hizo a la tierra,” *Diario Tiempo* (San Pedro Sula: 20 April 1999).

⁷³ Transparency International. *The Corruption Perceptions Index* (Berlin: September 1998). [Internet] www.transparency.de/documents/cpi/index.html [Accessed on 10 June 1999].

⁷⁴ Moreno, Blanca. “Congress cuts term of rights commissioner,” *Honduras This Week* (Tegucigalpa: 26 April 1999). [Internet] ,www.marrder.com/htw. [Accessed on 6 June 1999]. Wilson, James. “Honduras: Human rights curb under fire,” *Financial Times* (Panama City: 24 April 1999).

⁷⁵ Palencia, Gustavo. “Honduras obtiene un gran apoyo en la reunión de Estocolmo,” *Reuters* (Tegucigalpa), published in *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami: 30 May 1999). “Una autoridad autónoma debe manejar la ayuda internacional,” *Diario Tiempo* (San Pedro Sula: 6 June 1999).