

Hurricane Mitch

How Canada is Helping

November 8, 1998, the first Sunday after Hurricane Mitch. The remaining wall of a house is perched precariously atop one of the steep slopes that surround Tegucigalpa, capital of Honduras. Five little boys are playing on a ledge to the side of the wall, seemingly oblivious to the deep, yawning chasm that lies below. Hovering over the chasm in a helicopter, a camera crew picks up the image of the little boys. While the pilot radios for help and the newscaster pleads for someone to do something, television viewers wait helplessly for the wall of the house to slip down the slope into the abyss, taking the boys with it. And then the camera jerks away abruptly as though refusing to record the inevitable horror.

"It was heartbreaking to have to sit there and know those boys were going to die and to be unable to help," says Neil Mussel, the Canadian International

Development Agency (CIDA) representative who runs the Office of the Canadian Embassy in Tegucigalpa. At the time, Mussel and his staff of four were spending long days and nights tracking down all Canadians travelling or living in Honduras who had registered with the Embassy. By the end of the second week, the 378 registered Canadians scattered around the country had been located. So had the 257 registered Canadians in Nicaragua, the 662 in Guatemala and the 239 in El Salvador. All were safe and sound.

In the aftermath of Mitch, Neil Mussel and Jack Adams, his counterpart at the Office of the Canadian Embassy in Managua,

Nicaragua (the second-worst hit country in Central America), spent their days ensuring the transportation of relief goods, assessing the damage and helping to decide which projects proposed by the various NGOs and donors would receive funding from the original \$9.15-million Canadian aid package. It was not an easy task, but Canada and Canadians were determined to help.

While the task of getting the people of Central America back on their feet remains daunting, more than two-and-a-half months after the storm hit the region, Canadians like Neil Mussel, Jack Adams and their staff at Canadian missions still have a lot to give and a lot to do.

As part of DFAIT's domestic outreach program, our ambassadors to the countries affected by Hurricane Mitch visited communities across Canada in December to let Canadians know more about Canada's role in the relief effort and to thank them for their generosity.

Ambassador Denis Thibault, who is based in Costa Rica but is also responsible for Nicaragua and Honduras, spent nearly two weeks in Quebec and New Brunswick, while Canada's ambassador to Guatemala and El Salvador, Dan Livermore, covered Ontario, Manitoba and British Columbia. The ambassadors were each accompanied by a member of the Department of National Defence (DND)'s Disaster Assistance

Response Team (DART). The

visits provided the ambassadors with an opportunity to speak at public events, talk to the media and meet with municipal officials and NGOs who had contributed to the relief effort. ●—

Individual Canadians, churches, trade unions and private corporations have been very generous in helping victims of Hurricane Mitch. Through donations to organizations such as Winnipeg's Mennonite Central Committee, Orlam-Québec, CARE Canada and several other NGOs, they have contributed more than \$15 million towards emergency assistance and reconstruction in Central America.

Canada has pledged \$100 million in official development assistance (ODA) over the next four years to restore agricultural production, to reconstruct basic health facilities and water and sanitation infrastructure, and to rebuild houses, as well as to plant trees on hillsides to prevent erosion. Canada has also suspended repayments of principal and interest on \$29.5 million in official debt owed by Honduras (Nicaragua has no outstanding debts). In addition, Canada announced a \$3.7-million contribution for the removal of landmines and to support community-based rehabilitation programs in Central America.

Members of the 180-strong DART Team helping Honduran victims of Hurricane Mitch.



photos: CANAPRESS