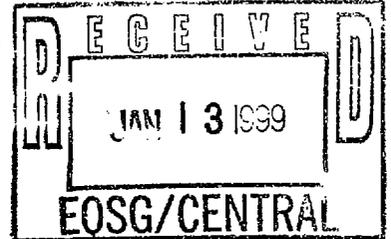


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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

**MESSAGE TO THE INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK
CONSULTATIVE GROUP
FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES
Washington, D.C., 10-11 December 1998
(To be delivered by Mr. James Gustave Speth,
Administrator of UNDP)**



The history of Hurricane "Mitch" has yet to be written. But this much we know: it is a human tragedy on an enormous scale, with 10,000 lives lost and hundreds of thousands more ruined as homes were washed away and roads, bridges, plantations and farms destroyed.

It is about children who were carried away by the floods and others who survived only to find themselves orphaned, threatened by disease or unsafe drinking water; and of yet others whose schools were destroyed or turned into shelters for the homeless.

It is about the reversal of progress in health painstakingly achieved over decades, about broken water networks, damaged food safety, increases in disease and the risk of overcrowding in shelters.

We know that the direct and indirect damage from "Mitch" runs into billions of dollars and will most certainly slow growth, raise deficits and spur inflation. We know that, especially in Honduras and Nicaragua, the economic effects of the disaster will be felt for years to come.

But as we listen to the facts and figures over the next two days, we should always bear in mind the sheer trauma inflicted by this disaster.

We should not forget how "Mitch" bore down on the isthmus with almost supernatural strength, remaining stationary off the Caribbean coast of Honduras for days, dumping torrential rains, and then, when it finally moved, appearing to seek out the path of maximum damage.

The poorest, living in high-risk areas such as river banks, bear the brunt of the tragedy. The storm destroyed the crops and businesses that represented the best chance of reducing this poverty.

The result is probably the worst ecological disaster ever to hit Central America. Man-made factors aggravated the impact.

The deforestation of the isthmus, at a rate of close to 400,000 hectares per year, has destroyed much of the protective forest cover, exposing the soil and leaving communities vulnerable to deadly floods and mudslides.

"Mitch" struck as the region was emerging from decades of conflict and forced migration, as it was healing the scars of war and consolidating fragile democracies. Important efforts were being made to strengthen democratic governance; to build national institutions that uphold the rule of law; to hold free and fair elections; to address issues of land registration and ownership; to promote dialogue and consensus building; and to fulfil commitments from peace accords that ended years of violent conflict. These efforts must not falter.

And so the story of "Mitch" is also one of solidarity and courage. Central Americans of all backgrounds and at all levels have joined forces to mitigate the effects of the disaster and to begin the task of rebuilding. The Governments of the region have sent the clear message that the crisis will unite their countries, rather than drive them apart.

A number of outside countries have shown their solidarity by forgiving or postponing the debts held by Honduras and Nicaragua, the two countries hardest hit by the hurricane. Others have moved quickly to disburse humanitarian aid and to approve fresh resources for rehabilitation and reconstruction.

More will be needed. And so another important chapter of the story of "Mitch" is being written at this meeting. It is my hope that this chapter will help demonstrate how a horrific tragedy can be converted into an opportunity for positive change. For "Mitch" provides us with the opportunity to build something new. To address both the immediate need for rehabilitation and the need to improve the underlying social and economic conditions. To find innovative ways of transforming debt relief into social development. To focus not only on damaged infrastructure, but on reducing the vulnerability of the poorest segments of the population and on addressing environmental factors. To build and strengthen adequate institutional and organizational schemes, at the local, regional and national levels, for early warning, mitigation and response.

For the United Nations, "Mitch" has also created an opportunity to further enhance our partnerships with the governments and people of the region. And it has demanded of us a truly coherent, joint UN response. An Inter-Agency Task Force is coordinating our work to avoid costly overlaps. A single UN Inter-Agency Transitional Appeal for Relief and Immediate Rehabilitation is bridging the gap between emergency relief and longer term rehabilitation and reconstruction over the next six months. A single, comprehensive study will assess the prevailing national disaster management capacities across the region.

We in the UN are reaching out to our key donor partners.

And we seek to complement the long-term efforts of the international financial institutions by focusing our efforts on the human side of rehabilitation: health care, prevention of malaria, dengue and cholera, clean water, shelter and resettlement, food security, education, governance, capacity building and sustainable livelihoods.

We have modest resources. But we hope that they can serve to help build national capacities to minimize the adverse effects of "Mitch", and to reduce the risk and vulnerability to future disasters. Certain aspects of the recovery process -- such as roads, electricity and integrated watershed management -- would benefit from regional level analysis, but the disaster has hit the countries of the region in highly varying degrees, requiring a country-by-country approach.

And so, although the history of "Mitch" has yet to be written, it is my hope and the hope of all my colleagues in the UN system that the bitter memory of the ravages of this disaster may be in time lessened; and that it will one day give way to the promise of a future where a tragedy with consequences such as these cannot happen again.