

MESOAMERICA

Volume 24, Number 11, November 2005



NICARAGUA

Hurricane Beta Damage

On 30 Oct, Hurricane Beta hit land near Sandy Bay Sirpi, 320 kms. northeast of Managua, the capital city; it then weakened to a tropical storm dropping heavy rain over Nicaragua and Honduras. According to preliminary reports, at least 100 homes were destroyed and 173 were damaged by the heavy rains and wind in four communities in the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions, according to the Civil Defense Department and the National System of Protection, Mitigation, and Attention of Disasters (SINAPRED). In addition to the homes that were lost, five churches, two schools and two health centers were destroyed or severely damaged as were the roads. The continued rain and wind destroyed or damaged crops in at least 14 communities.

More than 20,000 people were evacuated from the Caribbean coast and placed in 27 makeshift shelters, such as churches and schools. A government relief helicopter was sent to the affected communities on 31 Oct, but at noon decided to turn back due to rough weather, leaving many of the affected communities isolated. There was little government help to evacuate the majority of the people, who made their own way to shelters in small boats and by foot. The majority had returned to the coast by 1 Nov, but at least 3,000 remain in shelters.

Although there are no reported deaths, an estimated 6,000 were injured, and the number of homes destroyed and damaged was worse than expected. Approximately 80% of the homes were destroyed in some communities and in others all the houses were destroyed. "It doesn't sound like much when one hears that 60 houses were destroyed, but there were only 75 homes in the entire community," said the director of the department of Civil Defense.

According to the executive director of SINAPRED, the government does not have resources to continue providing assistance to those affected by the hurricane. However, on 1 Nov, the government announced that, with international assistance, it will construct 100 new houses for the Miskito Indians living on the Caribbean coast and will repair another 234 damaged homes. Approximately \$51,000 is being transferred to the Urban and Rural Housing Institute to begin the work immediately. President Bolaños also delivered roofing material to replace the roofs lost in the wind, and additional materials will be sent

as funds become available, mainly from the Japanese government. Reconstruction of churches and schools will also begin soon.

National Assembly Passes Framework Law

On 19 Oct, 85 of the 92 members of the National Assembly voted to pass the “Framework Law” proposed as a result of an agreement between President Enrique Bolaños and FLSN leader Daniel Ortega. The law brought an end to the institutional crisis of the last 10 months, and will hopefully bring stability to the country. The constitutional reforms, which were the result of the Nov '04 pact between Alemán and Ortega, were passed by Congress in Jan '05 (Vol. 23, No. 12, Vol. 24, Nos. 1, 9). The reforms, which would transfer significant power from the Executive to the Legislative Branch, have been put on hold until Jan '07, when Bolaños' term will end. The Framework Law will also suspend rescinding the immunity of several high level government officials, including President Bolaños.

During the entire crisis, the international community, including the US, has been Bolanos' key supporters, while he had very little support within the country. Paul Trivelli, US Ambassador to Nicaragua expressed his approval of the new Framework Law, saying that if it will bring an end to the political crisis in Nicaragua it is a good idea, even if Ortega played a major role in bringing it about.

New Vice President Named

On 10 Oct, the National Assembly elected Alfredo Gómez Urcuyo, a PLC legislator, as vice-president of the country to fill out the term of former Vice President Jose Rizo Castellon. Rizo resigned on 27 Sep in order to dedicate all of his time to his '06 presidential campaign. Gomez' seat in Congress will be filled by his alternate, Fernando Alemán.

World Food Program aid sent to RAAN

On 9 Oct, the UN World Food Program (WFP) sent 64 metric tons of corn, beans, cereal and cooking oil to 14 Miskito communities along the shores of the Coco River in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), to combat the famine caused by flooding and rat infestations in the region since mid-Aug (Vol. 24, No. 9).

The Nicaraguan government requested emergency assistance from the US after the widespread flooding caused crop losses. US-AID has agreed to provide \$50,000, through WFP, to assist with food transportation costs. The money will pay for delivering emergency food rations, drinking water, seeds and fertilizer to the RAAN.

The food is expected to last the communities about 30 days, after which they will once again face a crisis. The communities being assisted were the hardest hit of the 96 communities that are in a state of famine. The UN estimates that there are 12,450 people that require food assistance in the Rio Coco area, and that several people have already died.

Citizens Action Against Hunger in Rio Coco, a coalition of young professionals backed by such NGO's as Oxfam, is collecting funds to purchase food, clothes and medicine for the victims of the famine, who were also hit by Hurricane Beta at the end of Oct. Camilo de Castro, a young journalist who is a part of

the coalition's organizing committee reported that, "The Rumba Club (in Managua) will help by donating 40% of its profits on three consecutive Saturdays, starting on 5 Nov. There will also be a Christian Music Concert, which has given us permission to show a documentary about the hunger situation in Rio Coco and then take a collection."

Vaccinations in RAAS

On 25 Oct, the directors of the Municipal Department of Health in Rama, New Guinea, and Bluefields in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) announced that more than 50,000 people have been vaccinated against German measles in the past month, during a massive vaccination campaign beginning on 1 Oct. The goal of the health department is to vaccinate 80,000 people.

However, the massive vaccination campaign has caused a decrease in blood donations and has left the National Blood Center with a very low reserve of blood. According to its director, Rene Berrios, of the 150 people who usually donate blood daily, only about 50 are now able to donate. International standards set by the World Health Organization, require that a person wait for one month after being immunized against measles to donate blood, to avoid any possible side effects. Due to the vaccination campaign and the lack of donations during a hunger strike by banana workers in Aug (Vol. 24, No. 9), the blood supply is dangerously low.

The Center has also encouraged people over 40 years-old to donate blood, because they have been immunized to measles and many other diseases by the vaccination campaigns conducted during the FSLN reforms of the early '80s.

—*Jebi Nevin*