



North Country Mission of Hope

Working Together to Improve Lives

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HURRICANE MITCH

On the morning of October 20, 1998, satellite images showed unorganized thunderstorm clusters developing over the southern Caribbean and northern Venezuela, which were associated with a weak tropical wave. As the clusters skirted the coast and headed west, meteorologists kept a vigilant eye. It was late in the hurricane season, when the atmosphere-ocean system is primed for hurricane development over the southern Caribbean from tropical downpour-makers just like the ones drenching the South American coast that morning.

Thirty-six hours later, by the early morning of October 22, the clusters had become organized into a tropical depression. Before the day was out, Tropical Storm Mitch was born, the 13th named storm of the season. Number 13 would be more than just unlucky for much of Central America – it was destined to become one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes ever and one of the Western Hemisphere's greatest natural disasters of the 20th century.....

The Monster's Path

Mitch intensified as it drifted north on the 23rd and 24th, slowed by an upper level ridge of high pressure. A turn to the west on the 25th signaled a change: In the next 34 hours Mitch's central pressure would fall 1.77 inches (60mb)¹, bottoming out at 26.73 inches (905 mb) and tying Hurricane Camille for the fourth-lowest central pressure ever recorded in an Atlantic hurricane. It reached Category 5 intensity at 7:00 AM on October 26 – and maintained that strength for an amazing 33 hours...

For two days Mitch paralleled the north coast of Honduras as it continued to move slowly to the west. Feeder bands of thunderstorms repeatedly raked the coast and moved inland, dumping incredible amounts of rain over Honduras and Nicaragua. Onshore flow along the north coast of Honduras created waves 40 to 50 feet high. The already-torrential rain was enhanced as air was forced upwards by the highlands covering much of Honduras and Nicaragua.

Once onshore, Mitch meandered through the mountains of Honduras and continued to unload extreme amounts of rainfall. The water then cascaded down unprecedented flooding. When the torrents exited the valleys along the north coast, mud-laden water spread over a wide area. In several locations, banana plantation workers waited for two weeks on rooftops for the water to recede.

According to the National Climatic Data Center, estimated maximum total rainfall amounts over Honduras and Nicaragua ranged from 50 to 75 inches – and in one report an incredible 25 inches fell in six hours! Most of the rain gauges were washed away so satellite data will have to be studied to fine-tune the estimates.

To make a desperate situation even worse, much of the steep terrain of Honduras and Nicaragua is covered with poorly consolidated volcanic soil. Mudflows and landslides in this environment are deadly. In northwest Nicaragua, a mudslide traveled 13 miles down the slope of the Casitas volcano, burying 10 communities. The death toll in this sparsely populated remote area is expected to reach 2,000....

¹ Mb – millibars – a unit of atmospheric pressure

The Making of a Disaster

What turned Mitch into a monster?

The most important ingredient to Mitch's recipe was very warm ocean water. The intense October sunshine made plenty available by heating most of the surface of the southern Caribbean Sea to nearly 86° F. The warm water quickly evaporated, yielding unlimited supply of water vapor (high-octane hurricane fuel) to the atmosphere.

A second ingredient was a pre-existing surface disturbance that lifted this warm, moistened air, and, as the water vapor cooled and condensed, the energy captured from the sun was made available to the developing storm...

High above the evolving storm was a sprawling area of high pressure that provided two additional ingredients necessary for a monster hurricane: light winds that allowed energy to be concentrated in the region and outflow aloft which supported the lift of the initial disturbance.

As Mitch rapidly strengthened north of Venezuela, a hurricane of epic proportions was born, which matured quickly and went on its deadly rampage.

Economic Impact

During the 1990's, the economies of many Central American countries were finally getting on their feet after the civil unrest of the 1980's. At this critical stage, even a minor disturbance could cause an infant economic recovery to stumble and fall. Mitch would prove to be a powerful giant for both Honduras and Nicaragua to wrestle with, however, leaving each nation's economic system in ruins.

In Honduras, agriculture (mostly coffee and bananas) makes up 80 percent of all exports, as well, 60 percent of all jobs are due to agriculture. The figures are similar in Nicaragua. Banana growers estimate damage to the current crop is in the hundreds of millions of dollars and even worse, many of the young trees have been killed, making future yields questionable and putting jobs in jeopardy. When the Many Honduran "jornaleros" (day laborers) look out over the chaotic tangle of dead vegetation embedded in vast expanses of mud – which were once the productive north coast banana plantations – they have little hope of work in the near future.

Fortunately, the coffee crop was relatively unharmed. This was because coffee grows high on the slopes, well above the elevation where hundreds of small streams combined to concentrate four days of extreme rainfall into killer fivers. However, the "beneficios" (coffee processing plants) are nearly idle, because many mountain roads have disappeared, making it practically impossible to transport the harvest...

Nicaragua offers an example of the magnitude of the economic problem. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the total value of goods and services that a country produces. Preliminary figures place the total damage in Nicaragua at \$1.36 billion, or 67 percent of the GDP – a monumental figure for a weak economy to overcome. If a natural disaster in the United States caused damage amounting to 67 percent of our GDP, the bill would be a staggering \$4.3 trillion. That is equivalent to 170 hurricane landfalls the magnitude of Andrew, the costliest natural disaster in United States history.

.....(Mitch) brought Honduras and Nicaragua to a standstill, now wholly dependent on the generosity of the world for survival and eventual recovery. Honduras estimates that Mitch wiped out 50 years of progress in four days. In the words of Edna Amador, general editor of La Prensa, San Pedro Sula, Honduras, "As you can see, the tragedy is bigger than anyone can imagine. No Honduran ever expected this to happen and now we are in God's hands."

---Mace Bentley and Steve Horstmeyer
excerpted from "Monstrous Mitch,"
Weatherwise, March/April 1999

GRAPHIC

Chart A

Deadliest Atlantic Hurricanes			
Year	Storm	Areas Hit	Deaths
1780	"The Great Hurricane"	Martinique St. Eustatius Barbados	22,000
1998	Mitch	Honduras Nicaragua	<i>20,000+</i>
1900	"Great Galveston Hurricane"	Galveston Island	8,000
1974	Fifi	Honduras	8,000
1930	Number 2	Dominican Republic	8,000

Source: National Climatic Data Center

Chart B

Most Intense Atlantic Hurricanes			
By Lowest Pressure			
Year	Storm	Pressure	Duration of Category 5 Status
1988	Gilbert	26.23"	18 hrs
1935	Florida Keys	26.34"	less than 6 hrs
1980	Allen	26.55"	24 hrs
1969	Camille	26.73"	24 hrs
1998	Mitch	26.73"	33 hrs
By Wind Speed			
Year	Storm	Wind	Duration of Maximum Wind
1969	Camille	195 mph	6 hrs
1980	Allen	195 mph	less than 6 hrs
1988	Gilbert	185 mph	12 hrs
1950	Dog	185 mph	12 hrs
1998	Mitch	180 mph	15 hrs

(adapted)