

To Central America with Love (1998)

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

Saturday, 12 November 2011 16:25



In the autumn of 1998, Hurricanes Georges and Mitch swept across the Caribbean Sea, ravaging such countries as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Dominica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Hit hard by the two hurricanes, these countries suffered severe damage to their economies and continue to be in need of foreign aid to tide them over their difficulties.

When Hurricanes Georges and Mitch swept across the Caribbean, floods and mudslides inundated roads, wiped out bridges and took a heavy toll in human lives. Millions of people found themselves isolated, without food, electricity or running water, and often without a home. The Tzu Chi Foundation has been quick to respond to these disasters. In October and November of 1998, in answer to calls for help from the affected countries, Tzu Chi sent inspection teams to Honduras, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as well as to the West Indies islands of Dominica, Saint Christopher and Nevis, to assess the extent of the damage and the needs of the victims. After careful investigation, the teams decided to give priority to Polo and La Romana, both in the Dominican Republic, and to Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, areas where help was scarce or late in arriving.

In order to bring assistance to the most needy areas, the inspection teams also held a series of meetings with the International Red Cross, Organization Panamericana de la Salud, and other charity organizations to discuss the distribution of relief supplies. The disaster brought damage and loss, but it also brought love. People from all over the world worked together to reduce the loss and pain suffered by the storm victims.

When Tzu Chi learned that victims were short of medical care, it immediately set up free clinics. When victims had nothing to eat, Tzu Chi distributed food parcels. When the health of the victims was threatened by poor sanitation, Tzu Chi provided necessary supplies to prevent the spread of epidemics...

In a letter to the storm victims, Master Cheng Yen wrote, "Though Taiwan is only a small country in Asia and is separated from you by the vast Pacific Ocean, we fully sympathize with you in your plight. What we bring to you is not much, but it carries the sincerest love and care of all the Tzu Chi people. We believe that through your effort and will, you will soon be able to rebuild your homes and stand up on your own again. A better, brighter future is waiting to be created by you."

Below are excerpts from reports written by Hsu Kai-yi, Lin Lu-jung and Hsieh Chin-kui, who participated in the Tzu Chi relief mission to Central America. Through their reports, we can get a glimpse into how the people in the affected areas coped with the catastrophe.

Polo, Dominican Republic

On November 3, 1998, our inspection team arrived in Polo. Local people welcomed us warmly and showed us around. A month had passed since the hurricane hit, but no help had as yet

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arrived for the victims of this area. "We seem to have been forgotten by the government," the villagers sighed.

When we walked into a "house" built of cardboard, an awful stench engulfed us. Repelled by the foul odor, a local Taiwanese businessman who was accompanying us on our inspection tour stopped at the door and said, "Only kind people like you are able to walk through this door."

The hilly terrain of Polo made it susceptible to natural disasters. Another village situated in a valley, for example, was entombed by rocks and mudslides during the onslaught of the hurricane. Thirty-four people were killed and more than one hundred families were left homeless. The victims were still living in local public schools, which had served as temporary shelters since the storm. As a result, there were no classes for the children. The people desperately needed outside assistance to help them build new homes.

Besides dealing with the housing problem and the lack of clean water, electricity, food, medical supplies, job opportunities, and education, the people in Polo had to tackle a host of other problems that are hard for us to imagine.

La Romana, Dominican Republic

Hurricane Georges first made landfall on the island at La Romana. The destruction brought about by the storm can only be imagined--countless houses fell prey to the battering winds and rains, causing thousands of families to lose their homes and loved ones.

The Tzu Chi inspection team visited a public garbage dump located on a hilltop. As we understand it, Tzu Chi was the first aid organization to tour this place after the ravages of the storm. Around the dump lived thousands of illegal immigrants from Haiti, who subsisted on the garbage. Most of their houses, all built of materials collected from the dump, were reduced to tatters by the storm. The life of these immigrants, which had been harsh enough to begin with, worsened to a degree hard to imagine.

At dusk when it turned chilly, team members saw children wearing next to nothing shivering in the cold. A group of mothers with their children in tow roamed the trash heaps in search of anything edible or useful.

After a while, a truck loaded with garbage drove up to the dump. The faces of the local people brightened up at the sight and they began to swarm towards the truck, hoping to find food in the fresh garbage. Even pigs and dogs--all skin and bones--an right behind.

Because of such unhealthy living conditions and hunger, the people were afflicted with various ailments: diarrhea, rheumatism, arthritis and skin diseases were common. The bulging bellies of the children were evidence of malnutrition and serious health problems. Inadequate medical and food supplies and lack of clean water and proper shelter were all problems that the local population had to deal with.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

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