

directing council



PAN AMERICAN
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

XXIV Meeting

regional committee

WORLD
HEALTH
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XXVIII Meeting

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EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO GUATEMALA

On 4 February 1976, an earthquake whose intensity was 7.5 on the Mercalli scale struck Guatemala. It was apparently caused by the displacement of the Caribbean plate along the Motagua fault that crosses the country.

One-third of the national territory was affected by the earthquake, but its greatest impact was in the central and eastern regions, where 70 to 100 per cent of the physical infrastructure was damaged. The most serious consequence was, of course, the loss of human life (more than 24,000 deaths) and the very high number of injured (more than 95,000), to which must be added the emotional disturbances of the population and the orphans and disabled, all of which created an enormous social problem, especially when the injured were poor people.

Second only in seriousness to the deaths and injuries was the damage to housing; more than 250,000 housing units were destroyed in whole or in part, leaving approximately one million persons homeless; in addition, 25 per cent of the schools and 40 per cent of the welfare service buildings were damaged. Highways and railroads were seriously affected by earth slides, cracks and damage to bridges; a number of churches, historic monuments and archeological sites that form part of the cultural heritage of the country were also heavily damaged, as were 14 hospitals, 27 health centers and 71 health posts, in addition to water supply and sewage disposal systems.

The National Emergency Committee (CNE) was set up to assist the affected population and to appraise the magnitude of the damage. The National Reconstruction Committee (CRN) was established to deal with the reconstruction of the devastated area.

The Government took immediate steps to provide emergency medical care and to prevent epidemics; to provide food and water, shelter and housing; to improve the environmental situation; and to re-establish communications and transportation in order to facilitate assistance activities.

One hour after the disaster, PAHO/WHO offered its cooperation to the competent authorities, put all its resources in the country at their disposal, and was prepared to transfer others there if necessary. From the outset, PASB staff members worked full time with their national counterparts in the four priority areas designated by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare: medical care, disease control, environmental sanitation, and food supply.

A PAHO/WHO emergency fund in the amount of US\$150,000 was set up and was used from the first day onwards for the purchase of drugs, treatment material, biological products, laboratory equipment, etc.

At the request of the Ministry of Health, PAHO regular budget funds assigned to the country were transferred to the purchase of equipment and supplies, which were given high priority because of the prevailing circumstances.

Good coordination with other United Nations agencies and international organizations was achieved, and some of their funds were channeled through PAHO and the Ministry of Public Health.

The Director and Deputy Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, and the Representative to the IDB, the Geneva Liaison Officer with the World Food Program, the PASB Medical Officer responsible for disaster epidemiology, who coordinated the activities in Washington, as well as other staff members, visited Guatemala to agree on further assistance activities or to provide advisory services in various fields.

It is expected that during the rainy season there will be further earthslides and floods in different parts of the country, as well as an increase in respiratory diseases.

The reconstruction of the country will take time and money; it has been estimated that 10 years and US\$1.1 billion will be required. The central concern of the Government at this initial stage is to provide the one million homeless persons with housing and, in the health sector, to replace and improve the infrastructure for providing services and rehabilitating the persons who have been disabled.

It is recommended that the sphere of action of PAHO/WHO and of the Governments be enlarged, based on a policy that will enable it to act not only during emergencies but also to take preventive measures to prevent disasters whenever possible or to minimize their socioeconomic impact; and that the Bureau strengthen its technical unit responsible for these activities, and that it focus its attention not only on the immediate needs of the population but also on their medium- and long-term needs.

The admirable way in which the Guatemalan people responded to this tragedy is worthy of mention. Although communications, transportation, identification of critical needs and coordination of institutions are problems common to situations such as that described, the Government and in particular the Ministry of Health handled the emergency with remarkable efficiency.

Also worthy of mention is the solidarity shown by the various Governments of the world and in particular those of the Region and especially of Central America.

This report was submitted to the 76th Meeting of the Executive Committee, which adopted Resolution XVII at its session held on 28 June 1976. A copy of that Resolution is annexed to this report.

Annex

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF
THE DIRECTING COUNCIL

PAN AMERICAN
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

76th Meeting

WORKING PARTY OF
THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE

WORLD
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

76th Meeting



RESOLUTION XVII

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO GUATEMALA

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE,

Bearing in mind the provisions of Resolution XXX, of the XVIII Meeting of the Pan American Sanitary Conference, and Resolution XLIII, of the XIX Meeting of the Pan American Sanitary Conference;

Having noted the action taken by the Pan American Sanitary Bureau in connection with the emergency in Guatemala following the earthquake of 4 February 1976, and the technical assistance rendered; and

Recognizing that similar emergencies and disasters of vast proportions are bound to occur in disaster-prone countries of the Region, many of which do not as yet possess complete emergency relief plans or are unable to update and implement their plans for lack of technical assistance,

RESOLVES:

1. To thank the Director and the Secretariat, and particularly the personnel assigned to Guatemala, for their selfless and effective efforts to render assistance in the emergency following the earthquake of 4 February 1976, and also to thank the Governments which during that tragic period gave proof of the spirit of solidarity that inspires all the Members of the Organization.
2. To recommend that in view of the experiences of various Governments which, like Guatemala, have suffered natural disasters, the Directing Council request the Director to strengthen the existing program of assistance to Governments relating to national activities before, during and after the occurrence of natural disasters.
3. To instruct the Director to seek ways and means of effecting savings in order to support this program.

(Approved at the twelfth plenary session,
28 June 1976)