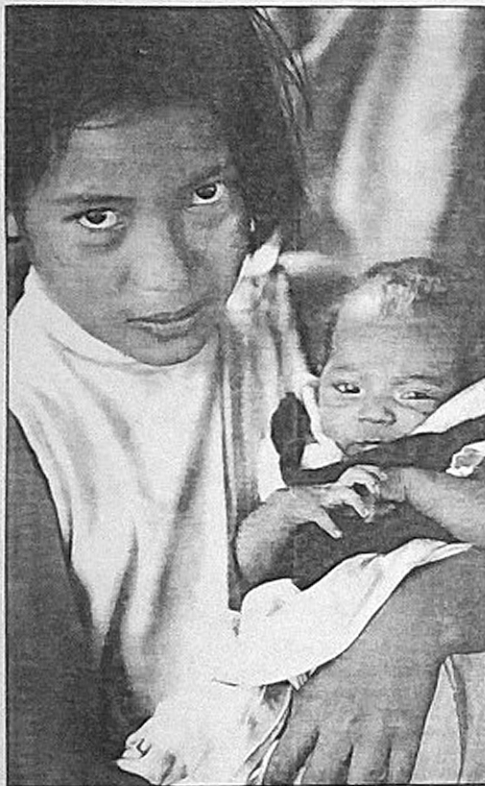


Resilient Hondurans forge ahead despite destruction



Two children are just part of a five-person family that was forced to live in a cardboard home under a bridge in Tegucigalpa after Hurricane Mitch destroyed their home.

By CHRIS BIRKS
The Northwest Herald

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — New Hope Mountain has kept its horrific secrets buried since Hurricane Mitch hit the city last fall.

Yet survivors relive the terror this mountain brought on the families that lived — and died — along its ridges. The mountain, named for the optimism abundant in Honduran culture, became a murderous mudslide that killed more than 100 people.

Many of the victims never will be found. They are buried in tons of soil, a grave too treacherous and too costly to excavate.

Raquel Garcia escaped with her life, her only scars the memories of that night.

"There used to be 32 homes right there," she said, pointing toward heaps of rocks and dead trees. "There were over 100 people living on that side of the mountain. They only found seven of them alive."

The relentless rain saturated the mountainside until finally, at 2 a.m., the land no longer could resist the water.

"I could hear them screaming as the whole side of the mountain gave way and slipped into the river below. They were screaming as their houses slid down the mountain," Garcia said.

"What I will never forget is the moment the screaming stopped. They were yelling, 'help us, help us,' and suddenly, it stopped. They were buried alive by the mud. There was no sound then, just that of the rain and the river."

There are similar stories throughout Honduras, with many of the country's 6 million inhabitants still trying to rebuild their lives after the storm last October.



Marguerite Salgado remembers the day Hurricane Mitch destroyed her house in a Tegucigalpa slum.

Hurricane Mitch was one of the worst storms to hit Central America. In all, 11,000 people were killed, nearly 6,000 in Honduras. There are 8,000 missing.

Yet throughout Tegucigalpa, the capital of about 800,000 residents, many areas seem to have escaped harm. Homes still stand, businesses remain open, people go about their daily lives. The normalcy is testament to the rebuilding efforts of the Hondurans, who are proud that visitors have to search for remaining signs of destruction.

A river called Cholulteca, or Grande by the locals, cuts through Tegucigalpa, separating it from its sister city, Comayagua. Some of the worst flooding occurred along its banks Oct. 31 when Hurricane Mitch struck, sending

water and mud careening down the river and tributaries.

Parts of the Rio Cholulteca rose 100 feet and enveloped three-story buildings in mud. A small lake appeared between the cities, remaining for weeks.

Blanca Flores, who lives in a slum called Little Breezes, is another example of the ability to adjust. Her cardboard shanty was swept away in the first few moments of the hurricane. But in her world, it was the best thing that could have happened.

"Sure, I lost my house, but it was made of cardboard. The flooded river brought trees from the hillside down to our neighborhood. I now have a house made of wood," she said, proudly looking at her new home with the bark still intact.

Many Hondurans lost more than their homes. Some cannot rebuild because their property either was washed away or covered with tons of mud and rocks. For these people, there is little choice but to stay at a shelter or refugee camp.

The Clover is within sight of the Little Breezes slum and its bark-sided homes, but it is worlds away. Row after row of single-roomed barracks are the only outward sign of these camps. More than 2,000 people live here, on a barren hunk of rock about the size of a football field rising above the countryside.

The Red Cross built The Clover for people who had no place to go. Its residents have a year to find housing. Despite this, construction continues to expand the camps to house more refugees.

Elsewhere, businesses have been reopened and streets and bridges have been repaired.

At Llantí Mundo auto garage on the banks of Rio Cholulteca, workers fought to reclaim their livelihood.

"We were back in business two months (after the storm)," said Fernando Avila, the chief of sales. "We could see that the boss was thinking about closing the store. He thought it was a total loss. Our enthusiasm to reopen inspired him to keep the business, and we saved our jobs."

A popular saying helps residents cope with their obstacles. Many repeat "Mitch was meant for us," which means the storm was an unavoidable act of God.

"Why start worrying?" Avila said. "If everyone was worried, no one would live in peace."

And that is why, despite all their heartache, the Hondurans still call it New Hope Mountain.