

ICWA LETTERS

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CE-8 THE AMERICAS

Chenoa Egawa is a Fellow of the Institute studying the marketing of Native American products, crafts and produce in MesoAmerica.

Los Damnificados

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

November 7, 1998

By Chenoa Egawa

Hurricane Mitch has been over Guatemala for days now. It has been raining hard and relentlessly. Every night, the sound of pounding rain permeates my dreams, so loud it is as if I am standing before an angry, rushing river. My breathing becomes shallow, my sleep restless. Sometimes I do not sleep at all. When I do, I dream. I am in the midst of all the images I have been seeing in the paper and on the news. Everything is destroyed. There is mud and water everywhere rushing down treeless hillsides and mountains. In one dream I am in a house with several other people. Everyone is in a state of panic, except for one tiny little boy who has quietly backed himself into a corner of the room. He is staring up at me, his eyes searching mine intently for an explanation to all this chaos. We are up to our knees in thick, binding mud and the walls are coming down around us. Everything is in shambles. I feel exhausted, frightened, cold and achy. I want out of this place and I struggle to wake myself up, only to fall back into another dream with the same level of desperation.

I am lucky. I live in a safe place in Guatemala City where minimal damage has occurred and I did not venture from the city until the storm passed and the highways were reopened. Just the same, the experience of being in the midst of such a powerful storm and experiencing the fury of the torrential rains that claimed thousands of lives and homes throughout Guatemala, and especially in the neighboring countries of Honduras and Nicaragua, was completely unsettling. Nearby, on the outskirts of town and beyond, people have faced some of the severest losses imaginable.

In Guatemala, more than 300 people died.¹ Thousands of others survived, though they lost all their possessions, including their homes and their lands. Although the destruction left by the hurricane was much more severe in scale in Honduras and Nicaragua, the losses incurred in Guatemala once again expose the fundamental tragedy of social inequality, an issue at the very roots of the hurricane's aftermath. As Oscar Clemente Marroquin stated in his article, *Empezamos a volver a la 'normalidad'* (We are beginning to return to 'normalcy,') "...this hurricane left us with a painful lesson, because it uncovered our great needs in the social area, and revealed the necessity to double efforts in order to tend to the population of this country that lives in conditions of misery."

As usual, those who suffered the greatest losses were the poorest of the poor. In his article, Marroquin was responding to other reports that Guatemala, almost two weeks after the passing of the hurricane, was finally beginning to return to 'normal.' "If," he argued, "'normal' means going back to the way the country was before, I hope that the effects of the hurricane will continue in order to shake up our consciences and make us see that we all have a social responsibility." For Marroquin, returning to 'normal' would

¹ *El Periodico*, GUATEMALA, Tuesday, November 17, 1998, *Las Tragedias de Guatemala*, by Luis Pedro Herandez, page 12.

mean an end to worrying about your fellow countrymen who lost family, homes, lands and all their possessions, because that, according to him, is what has been 'normal' in Guatemala over past years. "And those people in the shelters do not have to stay there any longer," he continues, "but can now return to their humble lands, and our pity or pain for those who have suffered can disappear, allowing us once again to live with all 'normality.'"²

When it was safe to leave the city two weeks later, I did not have to venture far to step into the devastation that Hurricane Mitch left in its wake. Heading northeast out of Guatemala City, I stopped beneath the Belize bridge where an extensive cluster of shacks – mostly constructed of scraps of wood, plastic, cardboard and corrugated tin panels – teetered precariously on a steep, eroded bank overlooking a river of free-flowing sewage and waste water. Murky brown liquid flowed by, carrying soapsuds two to three feet high along its surface. Every now and then, a gentle breeze would lift large puffs of the foamy mass into the air, carrying them along for a ways before setting them back down again along the banks among the garbage, or higher up along the hillside.

A group of women were washing their clothes there, and they saw me taking pictures from the road above. I could see them talking to one another and giggling shyly, covering their mouths with their hands as they looked at me and smiled. I smiled back and waved to them. Across the road, an elderly man sat in the window of a little, dark, wooden shack, a local shop of some kind evidently specializing in an assortment of rusty tools, old scraps of wood and other second-hand odds and ends. His view

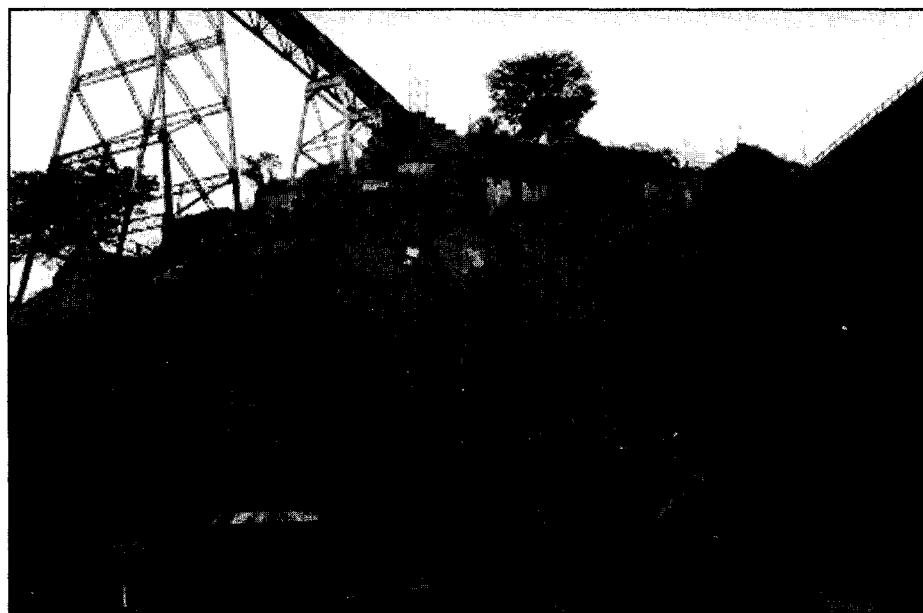
was of the shantytown leaning on the hillside beneath the bridge. I went over to ask him if this had been one of the areas that suffered losses from the heavy rains.

"Yes," he answered, "one woman died there a couple of nights ago. It had been raining all night and at about 4 a.m. her house was washed down into the river. She had been asleep inside." Other homes were lost that night too, but aside from the one woman, no other lives had been taken. Farther along this same road a similar settlement was harder hit. There, many people died. I could not go to that area however, as the road was still blocked by massive mudslides.

* * * * *

On Sunday, November 22, 1998 I went to Amatitlan, a small town set on the shores of the lake by the same name, about 30 kilometers southeast of the capital. According to a Guatemalan friend of mine, Lake Amatitlan used to be beautiful. "It still is beautiful," she said, "but now it is so contaminated that swimming in it is a health hazard. You would come out with nose, throat, eye and/or skin infections if you went in there now. And to think we used to swim there when we were kids."

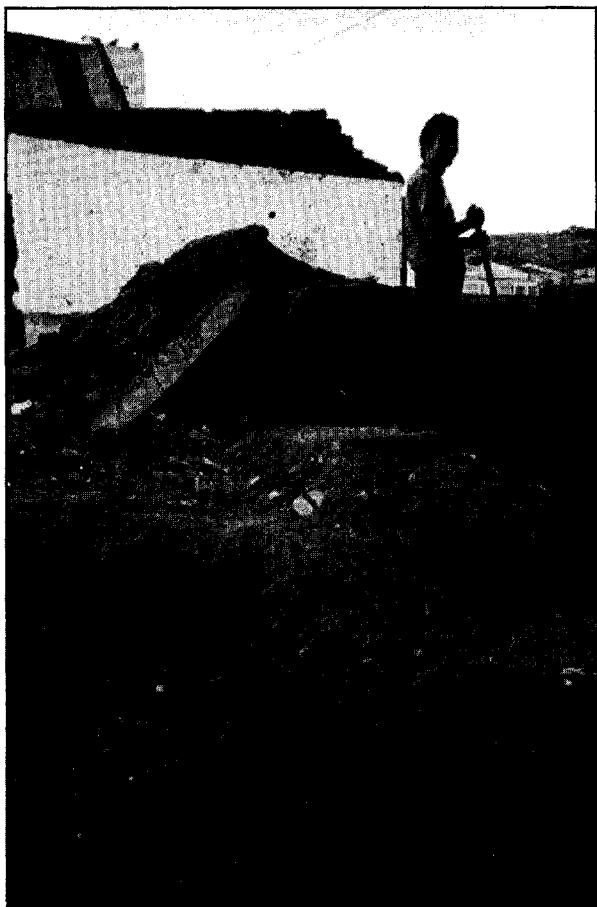
Over the years, the population of Amatitlan has grown continuously, expanding outward and up into the hills that surround the town. Large tracts of land were completely cleared to make way for new settlements, leaving the hills barren and highly susceptible to erosion. Sewage and garbage from the growing population most often ends up in the lake.



Homes beneath the Belize Bridge. This is where one woman died when her house was washed down the hillside.

Usually, the Jurun Marinala Dam controls water flow from the Michatoya River into Lake Amatitlan. However, with the excessively heavy rains the dam could not regulate the water flow. As a result, the lake rose 1-1/2 meters, flooding homes along the southern shoreline. Around the lake other people remained in a state of alert, ready to evacuate if the dam were to suddenly break under the growing pressure of excess water and sediments carried by the Michatoya. Some people left their homes and moved to safer areas with family and friends until the threat passed. Others preferred to stay in their homes, putting their lives at

² El Periódico GUATEMALA, Sunday, November 15, 1998, *Empezamos a volver a la 'normalidad,'* by Oscar Clemente Marroquin, page 2. Quotes translated from Spanish.



Dried mud left in Amatitlan after the floods. Behind the man protrudes the rooftop of a house. The address, #1355, is the only evidence that this was once a dwelling.

risk. Why? The very real fear that thieves would take advantage of their absence if they abandoned their homes.

On November 22nd, when I was in Amatitlan, the situation was still tenuous for those living along the shoreline. The water level of the lake had gone down, but only by a few centimeters, and the natural drainage systems remained completely blocked by sediments. Along the periphery of the lake, the degree of damage to the small outlying villages grew exponentially. The Mico River had also overflowed its banks, carrying away most of the homes in the villages of Triunfo 1, Triunfo 2 and La Esperanza, which were situated just three kilometers from the center of downtown Amatitlan.

Rafael Iriarte, a public school in Amatitlan, is one of five buildings being used as a shelter for families of the municipality who lost their homes during the hurricane. While in town, I visited the shelter and talked with some of the families that had taken refuge there. By that time, most refugees had already been there for three weeks. In total, there were 52 families, numbering just over 200 people. Each room housed five to six families averaging six people per family. The majority of them came from Triunfo 1, Triunfo 2 and La Esperanza. I spoke with the

manager of the shelter first. He was working with the mayor of Amatitlan, Marco Tulio Castro Pineda, to distribute food, clothing and medicines to the victims from these villages. Although the three villages had been declared uninhabitable by local authorities after intense flooding that began in the area on November 2nd, many people remained, not wanting to leave their land despite the fact that they had lost everything that made the land livable. Food and clothing were distributed to all people in the shelter, as well as those who stayed in the villages, though as I would later discover, actually rectifying the situation would require efforts and resources far in excess of the provision of food and clothing.

The manager was proud of the way the shelter was being run. He had a small committee formed from the families staying at the school, who worked with him in delegating responsibilities to each family on a rotating basis. In that way cooking, cleaning, keeping watch, disciplining the children, etc. was kept in order. Some people had been injured in the flood, though the manager said that most were faring well.

Yes, there were many unmet needs, but all in all the people were doing fine, "eating three times a day and also getting snacks between meals. They are better off now than they were before," he said. "Most of them are used to eating just once a day."

Later that same day, I talked with the mayor of Amatitlan, Castro Pineda. He had a very similar comment about the distribution of food, only he added that the shelter experience was evidently so positive that "it was like a trip to Disneyland for the people." His pride in this assessment was readily apparent. According to him, these people never had it so good.

Each person received three changes of clothing (except for undergarments) and food. Most people were sleeping on pieces of cardboard placed upon cold tile or cement floors, each family grouped together in its own small section. Many suffered from colds and lung problems as a result. Mattress pads were not included on the list of items needed for victims of the hurricane, though they definitely could have been used. Other personal items, such as soap, towels, sanitary napkins, toothbrushes and toothpaste were also lacking. Skin funguses were a developing problem, since most people had waded through contaminated waters in order to arrive at the shelters. There had not been any problems with cholera in this particular shelter at the time of my visit, though it was feared as a likely outbreak in the aftermath of the floods.

As I walked around the school grounds talking with people, I noticed that some rooms were orderly and others chaotic, due in part to the insufficient availability of space and supplies, as well as to each family's own personal standards. In my opinion, it was nowhere near as clean

as the manager had indicated earlier. The bathrooms were atrocious. The floors were covered with standing water, baskets next to the toilets all overflowed with used toilet paper and there was no running water to flush the toilets or wash your hands. It was far from sanitary, to say the least.

People were happy to see me and talk with me. They knew that I was a foreigner and that perhaps I was there to bring aid of some kind. I told them where I was from and that I was writing an article about their situation to send to the United States. I took numerous photos of the children, and parents quickly rounded up their kids so that I could get family snapshots. Everyone wanted a picture taken. Kids were swarming around me as if I were the Pied Piper, jumping in front of the camera and shouting with excitement, "Take one of me with my friend! Take one of me with my brothers! I want one by myself!" I promised them that I would come back to visit soon and bring them copies of the photos.

Most people seemed to be doing okay, despite what they had had to endure thus far, but in their eyes I could see the truth. Kids are adaptable, and like children everywhere they were laughing and playing with one another. The teenagers were quieter, watching and listening, more aloof but attentive. Adults, most of whom were parents, were very vocal and animated about their experiences, how they fled from their homes, how they felt about their current instability and their anxious preoccupation with what the future held for them and their children. The older people, the grandparents, were the ones who impressed me the most. During my travels to the interior of the country, I am always in awe of the people, because they seem so patient and tolerant in the face of inconvenience and adversity. When I looked into the eyes of the grandparents at the shelter, I saw that the silent calm I had previously read as patience also carries a certain amount of resignation. At what point does patience wear so thin that it becomes resignation? Surely this was being tested in these people.

Evangelism was the predominant Christian sect in the three villages. People recounted their experiences, each and every detail of which was directly attributed to the will of God. "It was Sunday, November 2," said Rosa Aguilar Mendez, an older woman from La Esperanza who with eight other family members had been in three shelters since November 3rd. "That night we were just

about ready to sleep, and we were watching the news on TV. We saw how people in other areas were really suffering from the hurricane and we thought, *pobre gente* [unfortunate people]. Thanks to God we were okay. It had been raining hard for three days and nights, but we thought it would pass. With all the tragedy that was taking place elsewhere we felt really bad, but we had no idea the same thing was going to happen to us. We are thankful, because God pardoned us with our lives, but we lost everything else. Everything we had is gone. Our family is complete, so we are grateful and we are waiting here for the blessing of God. We don't know what He will bring for us, but we are hoping for new land. We do not want to return to La Esperanza, because it is not safe there."

Rosa's daughter piped in after her mother, filled with an urgency to tell me everything. "It was 11:30 at night when the Mico River overflowed. Within a matter of sec-



A group of children who live in Rafael Iliante shelter

onds it was all around our house trapping us and we couldn't leave. It all happened so fast, that by the time we realized the river had broken its borders, the water was already upon us."

A young man standing nearby told me that the sound of approaching waters was so loud that most people thought that it was an earthquake, at first. "I climbed the *pila* [an outdoor wash basin]," Rosa's daughter continued, "and tried to look around, screaming out into the darkness to find out where everyone was and if they were okay. Our other family members were in the other rooms. We had three rooms next to each other at our house, and during the night two of them were washed away by raging currents. Everything was flowing by, huge rocks, sticks and trees.

"I gathered up my family and we climbed onto the



Grandparents sitting at school desks in the shelter

roof of the Evangelical Church nearby. That is where we stayed until 5 a.m. the next morning. We shouted for help, but the roads to the village had turned into rivers and the firemen couldn't get in because the waters were so strong that they knocked the bridge down too. It rained the whole night. Many of our neighbors were injured. Some of them were carried along in the currents and beaten up by rocks and sticks. All of the houses that were above ours were washed away.

"That night we prayed to God that dawn would come soon, so that we could see if there was a way out. It was completely dark. At about 5 a.m. a group of Boy Scouts arrived with ropes that they tied to some trees on the opposite side of the waters, then waded through to where we were and secured the ropes. We had to walk through the water holding onto the ropes for safety; everyone was terrified, but we had no choice. After crossing through the flooded area we walked about three kilometers to town where the hospital is, carrying injured people in sheets or blankets, and on *laminas* [corrugated tin panels] from the roofs, whatever we could find. Normally it takes only half an hour to get there, but in some places the mud was up to my chest. It took forever to move through it, and so many people were injured. If it rains hard again the same thing will happen, so we don't want to go back. This time God blessed us with our lives. We don't know if He would give us a second chance."

I heard similar stories told by others. One man, Mateo de la Cruz Aguilar, was carried down river by the current and his foot got wedged under

rocks and sticks. He stayed in the river for hours until someone finally spotted him and helped free him from the debris.

As I was leaving the shelter, a young girl came running up to me. She said that the two women I had met earlier who were in charge of the *bodega* [storeroom] wanted to talk to me. Would I come back to the kitchen with her? I entered the kitchen and the two women both looked at me, lowering their heads a bit as if they were embarrassed.

"What is it?" I asked them.

"I want to know if you can get me a sewing machine," the older woman, Dominga Garcia, said. "Before the hurricane took everything, I made my living as a seamstress, but the flood took even my sewing machine." I said I would include her request in my article, and then we would have to wait and see what happened, but that I could not guarantee anything. My friend who was with me said that she would also see what she could do. As we were walking out the door, I looked back at her. Her expression had changed to one of deep sadness and tears began to roll down her cheeks. She held her hands before her face and turned toward the wall. I went back to give her a hug and held her. Her shoulders shuddered as she cried in silence.

Many people also lost their jobs, and consequently their livelihood, as a result of the storm. Nobody I talked with was working at the time. Too many other things were



Mateo de la Cruz Agiular and some of his children (there are ten family members in total). Mateo was the man who was pinned in the Mico River by rocks and branches for several hours before he rescued.

more urgent, but going without pay for any length of time means more problems later. Before Mitch, the men usually left the villages at dawn and returned at dusk, working on construction crews or as guards in the city. Women stayed at home with their children, worked in nearby *maquilas* [factories and/or "sweatshops"] or had their own small businesses. Some cooked and sold food. One lady made firecrackers. Others were seamstresses. All documents and paperwork were lost in the floods as well, and without a *cedula*, the standard national document for personal identification, one cannot work.



A typical 7'x 7' dwelling in Rafael Iriarte, housing upwards of ten individuals. Sheets of cardboard are being used as sleeping mats

I had listened to many stories while I was at the shelter, but as yet had no idea how serious the situation had truly been for the people of Triunfo 1, Triunfo 2 and La Esperanza. Two days later I returned Rafael Iriarte to deliver copies of the photos.

Porfirio Velasquez, a young man from La Esperanza, offered to take me to see where his family had lived before they were forced to move into the shelter. We entered La Esperanza on foot. The amount of devastation was overwhelming. Many people were still living there. How? I do not know. La Esperanza looked more like an empty riverbed that one might see up in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State, than it did a village. The flash flood had come down from the surrounding hillsides carrying with it trees, tree trunks, branches and boulders, many of which measured at least 4 feet in diameter. Among the boulders were odds and ends from the flooded villages — shoes, pieces of clothing and corrugated steel panels twisted up like aluminum soda cans.

Everything except for a few homes made of cement blocks and the Evangelical Church was completely destroyed. Muddy stains on the surviving structures marked the height that the waters had reached, measuring many inches above the tops of the doorways. Several feet of mud filled the interior of these homes.

People were rummaging through the ruins looking for anything salvageable. One lady had recovered a small metal pan and a coffeepot, both badly twisted and bent, but functional. As I walked through the village with Porfirio, a group of 20 to 30 people gathered around us and we talked. One lady was there from a neighboring village named La Canada, which had also suffered flood damage, but not as badly as the other three, according to the people of La Esperanza. She had gone to the mayor's office and volunteered to do a census.

"Here on my list I am writing down all the names of the people in Triunfo 1, Triunfo 2 and La Esperanza, and who wants to stay here, who wants help with *limpieza* [cleaning], who wants to move to new lands, and so on. We have to take responsibility here. If our houses are full of mud than we need to get in there and clean them," she said, assuming an air of authority. "Nobody is going to come and clean them up for us."

To a certain degree she was right, though I wondered who was strong enough to move those massive boulders. "We need tractors to help us clean this land," said one man. "Yes," everyone agreed. "If we are going to stay here, then we will need help to redo the water and drainage systems too." They still had electrical power, but no running water and no sewage system.

I was curious to know how long the people had lived here and whether or not they were originally from Amatitlan. In asking, I learned that Triunfo 1 and Triunfo 2 were settled in the early 1980's. People had come here from all over the country. A program called *Plan Internacional* was set up with the support of the Guatemalan and Spanish governments to help people who were living in zones of conflict during the 1980's. *Plan Internacional* had made lands available in areas closer to the capital where victims of the violence in the interior, and particularly in the Quiche region, would supposedly be safer. As part of the *Plan*, subsidized lands were set aside on the outskirts of Amatitlan (there were lands in other areas too).

Triunfo 1 and 2 were settled in that way, and under the *Plan*, lands were sold to the people by the Guatemalan government at a low rate, and water, electricity and sewerage were provided. Several of the villagers with

whom I spoke stated that all three villages were built upon land that was known by the government to have previously been the original riverbed of the Mico River. Those who sold the land, therefore, knew that it was subject to periodic flooding. The woman conducting the survey announced that the last major flood happened in the same area about 23 years ago, but at that time nobody was living there so no human lives were at risk. Some people were aware that they lived in the old riverbed. Others said that this information was not provided them when they moved to the area under the *Plan*. Now that they were aware of it however, they did not want to remain in the villages.

People of La Esperanza had also come to Amatitlan from other departments of Guatemala – Jutiapa, Salama, Izabal, the Quiche – in search of land and employment, but they were not beneficiaries of the *Plan Internacional*. They had either bought their land outright from private owners or were still renting small plots. There was an average of 15 families per village, each family representing a distinct region of the country. This explained one thing I observed in the shelter. I had thought it was odd that people interacted very little with one another at Rafael Iriarte, even though they all were from the same three villages. In actuality they all came from very different cultures, languages and regions throughout Guatemala. It was only through circumstances beyond their control that they had been forced together. Extreme poverty was the most predominant, visible, common denominator.

The people of the three villages were divided in terms of what they wanted and what they needed.

Some were angry, saying that the people in the shelters were just too lazy to clean up their homes and were waiting for someone else to come along and do it for them. “They don’t really need help! They just want free handouts, food, clothes and mainly land. We are the real victims!” one woman shouted angrily. There may have been truth to this in some cases, but Porfirio and his family were in the shelter and he showed me where his house used to be. There was nothing left.

No collective effort to seek help from local authorities had yet been organized among the villages. Except for the lady from La Canada, nobody had done any censuses on the number of people who remained in the villages, the number of homes destroyed, who wanted to go, who wanted to stay,

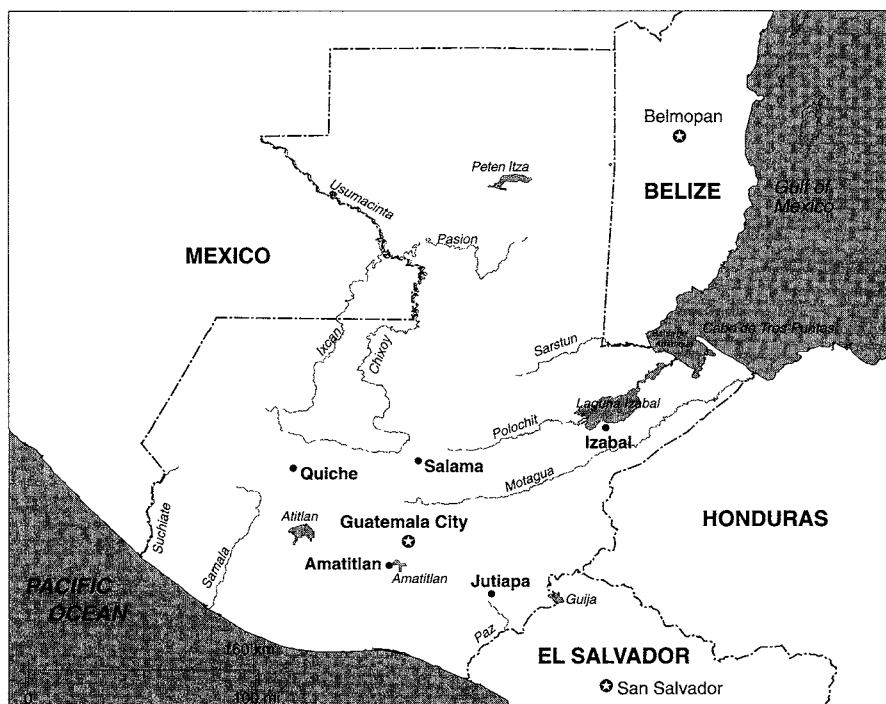
and what materials were needed for reconstruction. Most people just seemed confused about what should be done.

“The mayor came to visit us a few days after the flood hit,” said one man. “He told us that he was looking for lands for those who want to move, but that we would have to be patient. He has other priorities to take care of first. We don’t know how long we will have to wait, or if there will ever be lands. Nothing is definite.”

The destroyed bridge, elevated water level of Lake Amatitlan, and all the homes and businesses on the shoreline are the top priorities of local authorities. When I talked with the mayor two days earlier in his office, he said that he did not want to bother the President right now with more requests for land and building materials for the *damnificados* (“damned,” or “victims”) because the President had enough to worry about already.

“We think we have some land for them,” said the mayor. If he could secure the land, the 52 families that were currently in the shelter would be able to move there. It would be divided into 52 plots of 10 square meters each, with eight to ten people inhabiting each plot. Those who were not in the shelters were not figured into the equation. “This land still does not have running water, electricity or sewerage, though, and that will take awhile to organize,” he said. In addition, it was still unclear where housing materials would come from. “We gave some people tin panels and wood and they sold them,” he said.

Who knows for sure? When I asked the people in La Esperanza about this, they said that they needed land first. “What are we going to do with materials if we have no place to build a home?” they responded. A few people



did admit that they had received a couple tin panels and a few boards, but not nearly enough to build a house. I did not ask if they sold them or not.

So what comes next? The people in Rafael Iriarte have been in the shelter for almost one month (as of December 3rd). Originally, they were supposed to be out by now, but the manager of the shelter estimated that they would stay there through Christmas if he could continue to get food supplies. After Christmas they will most likely be kicked out. School starts up again in January and the kids will need their school back. Without a positive alternative — new lands, that are safe to build upon, building materials and infrastructure — they will end up back in Triunfo 1, Triunfo 2, and La Esperanza.



Another family at Rafael Iriarte

"In *Lo que Mitch nos deja, El pobre es ahora damnificado*,"³ (In what Mitch leaves us, The poor are now victims), Edgar Gutierrez begins. "With Hurricane Mitch, the earthquake of 1976 and Fifi as natural phenomena, and the wars as human phenomena, the first people we remember are the poor: Those who defy the law of gravity on the cliffs, those who inhabit fragile huts of cardboard, those who survive where nobody else wants to live. *They* bury their dead. *They* lose. And now Mitch reminds us of them, and moves us with their tragedy. They

are the news, not because they are poor but because they are *damnificados*. They appear on the front pages of newspapers and in news bulletins around the world. They are seen in Germany, Japan, Australia. And tomorrow, when they are no longer the news of the day and they return to being the poor? Well, it will be said, [the poor] live with structural problems. And there are millions of them throughout the country, and we cannot discriminate against anyone, because they all have needs. To deal with the structural problems will take a long time. When there is no emergency, the poor do not exist." □

News clips

"The executive director of the National Fund for Peace (Fondo Nacional para la Paz, Fonapaz) Enrique Godoy, explained that the damages are being evaluated and a plan is being prepared to resolve the housing problems caused by the storm.

"He indicated that he would go to the settlements of the capital to see what type of problems exist, but he already stated that it will be impossible to relocate all of the *damnificados*, because there are not lands available."

"There are people who will have to return to their lands previous to any reacomodation," said the Minister of Finances, Pedro Miguel Lamport."

"...In accordance with the figures estimated by Fonapaz, 200,000 families are in need of new homes, which represents more than one million people.

"The problem is structural and we cannot resolve it overnight, because to do so we would need five years and more that Q500 million," said Pedro Miguel Lamport."

"...Ninety percent of the *damnificados* will return to their homes and the rest will be offered other options."

"...In the meantime, Ricardo Goubaud, of the Guatemalan Fund for Housing (*Fondo Guatemalteco para la Vivienda, Foguavi*) specified that plans for dwellings will only be presented to those people who were affected by the storm and are in the shelters as a result."⁴

³ *El Periodico GUATEMALA*, Monday, November 9, 1998, *Lo que Mitch nos deja. El pobre es ahora damnificado*, by Edgar Gutierrez, page 11. Quotes translated from Spanish.

⁴ All news clips translated from *Prensa Libre*, Saturday, November 7, 1998, *Crisis de vivienda*, by Lucy Barrios and Juan Carlos Ruiz, page 6.

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