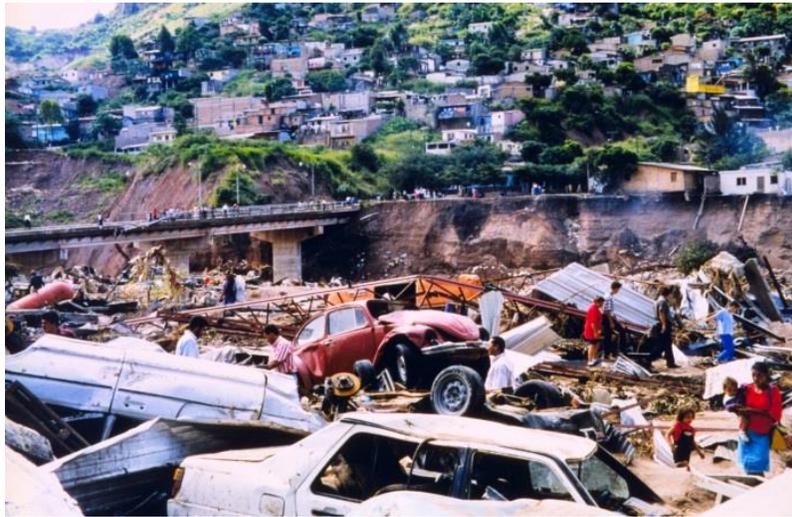


Hurricane Mitch (1998)



During the second week of October 1998, a tropical wave moved through West Africa. This tropical wave would become the one of the deadliest and most costly hurricane's ever seen in Central America, Hurricane Mitch.

As the tropical wave moved through the tropical Atlantic Ocean after formation, upper-level winds prevented the system from strengthening. The system moved through the eastern Caribbean Sea on October 18th and 19th, where it finally became better organized. The storm moved in a small loop later that week, and while doing so, became Tropical Storm Mitch, the 13th named storm of the 1998 Atlantic Hurricane Season. On October 24th, the storm developed into a hurricane south of Kingston, Jamaica. After threatening Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, Hurricane Mitch took a turn for the west and rapidly intensified due to favorable conditions.

The storm reached peak intensity on October 26th as a Category 5 hurricane displaying sustained winds of about 180 mph and a low pressure of 905 mb – making it the lowest recorded pressure for any October hurricane ever recorded in the Atlantic at that time.

Early on October 29th the hurricane's center made landfall 81 miles east of La Ceiba, Honduras, as a weakened hurricane with winds of 98 mph and an associated storm surge of 12 feet. For the next week, the system moved very slowly through Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Belize, and El Salvador. The hurricane's slow speed, about 4.6 mph, and its movement over the Cordillera Isabelia mountain range caused a tremendous amount of rain to fall in Honduras and Nicaragua. Rainfall totals amounted to over 35.9 inches in Choloteuca, Honduras, with other parts of the country receiving accumulations of over 10 inches.

Hurricane Mitch weakened to a tropical storm on the morning of October 20th, and then to a tropical depression by the evening of October 31st. Mitch's surface circulation dissipated near the Honduras-Guatemala border on November 1st, and its remnants moved off the Mexican coast November 2nd as a cloud-system center. Here, Mitch lingered as it regained tropical storm status, but as it made another landfall over the northwestern coast of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula on November 4th it weakened to a tropical depression.

Hurricane Mitch produced incredible rainfall, which caused widespread flooding and generated many landslides, predominantly in Honduras and Nicaragua. No final international death toll has been established due to the extensive damage, but at least 11,000 people were killed and 9,191 more were missing. Flash floods and mudslides associated with Mitch's rainfall destroyed tens of thousands of homes, rendering over 20% of Honduras's population homeless. The majority of bridges and secondary roads in Honduras were heavily damaged or destroyed, causing many communities to become isolated and unable to receive assistance. The magnitude of the damage was so great that it is said that existing road maps were rendered useless. Flooding from Mitch also destroyed 70% of total crops in Honduras, including 80% of banana, 60% of sugar cane, and 58% of the corn crops. Crop damage itself amounted to losses of up to \$1.7 billion (1998 USD).

The other country receiving the brunt of Hurricane Mitch's elements was Nicaragua, which, while damage was less severe than in Honduras, significant destruction did occur. For example, a mudslide moving off La Casitas Volcano in the northeastern part of the country engulfed several communities at its base, amounting to a death toll of at least 2,000. As many as 23,900 homes were destroyed in Nicaragua along with 340 schools, and about 750,000 people lost their homes or possessions with half a million houses damaged.

Many thousands of homes and a great number of crops and livestock were destroyed throughout the rest of Central America as well. 126 bridges and 800 miles of road were affected by mudslides and floods in Costa Rica, mostly along the Inter-American Highway that had been damaged by Hurricane Caesar two years prior. Damage in the United States was \$40 million, due to the destruction of 645 homes in Florida caused by tornadoes. Total damage from the storm amounted to \$5 billion. Hurricane Mitch was the deadliest Atlantic weather event since the Great Hurricane of 1780, which killed 22,000 people in the eastern Caribbean. It displaced the 1900 Galveston Hurricane to become the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane on record.