

COMMUNIQUE

HOW TO HELP THE CHILDREN IN THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE MITCH

A joint statement by:

International Social Service, Defence for Children International

Save the Children Alliance and International Catholic Children Bureau

The signatories, international organisations specialised in questions relating to children and the family, concerned about some forms of aid suggested in disaster situations like the one that has just struck several Central American countries, wish to reaffirm the rights of the child, recognised in the United Nations Convention, and the responsibility of States, organisations and individuals, by drawing attention to the aid policy that it considers in the best interest of children.

WHAT SHOULD NOT BE DONE

The temporary placement of children in families abroad as well as intercountry adoption are not adequate assistance measures for children in the event of a natural disaster. The signatories advise against the placement - even temporary - of children in other countries, either neighbouring or distant countries.

Evacuating children or placing them temporarily in families abroad is more traumatic than useful for the children involved. The change of environment is an additional upheaval coming on top of the various traumas the child has just lived through. Returning home later will be a shock for the child who will have to adapt once more.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IN THE CHILDREN'S INTEREST ?

• keep the children in their usual surroundings

During the emergency phase efforts must focus on providing a basic protection for children (shelter, food, medical care, affection, psychological support, education) in their normal surroundings together with other children or adult members of their family or community. We recommend that public and private organisations in the

international community promote and support programmes that help to achieve this objective.

• when children are with their family or members of their community

Every effort must be made to enable children, for whom a family member (parents or the enlarged family) has been identified, to stay with this family, including during the emergency phase. Help must be provided to support families in need so that they care for their children. During the emergency phase when a child has no family member but is in the care of people from his/her community, help should be given to these temporary foster families to enable the child to stay with them.

• when the children are separated from their immediate family

• It is essential to identify unaccompanied children as soon as possible, that is those who are separated from their parents and where there is no responsible adult either by law or custom.

• Every effort must be made to gather the necessary information rapidly to identify the children, to reconstitute their past, to discover their family and community links. This information makes it possible to carry out a search later for persons likely to take care of the child for good.

• During the emergency phase, children at present unaccompanied must as far as possible

be taken care of at the local level, either in foster families within their community, or be assembled in existing institutions. Setting up new institutions should as far as possible be avoided and in case it is absolutely necessary during the emergency period, they should be considered as temporary transit centers until family solutions are met.

It is important to clearly identify the people or institutions the child is entrusted to, because the risks of trafficking in children increase in times of upheaval.

The search for members of the family or of the child's community must be started very quickly and carry on for at least a year. In fact, because of the chaos caused by the disaster, the displacement of people as well as the co-ordination of information are difficult for many months. People could have survived or been looking for someone without being able to make it known. Coordination of information at a national level should be encouraged. If there is a need for tracing and reunification programmes, these should be coordinated by an agency which experience in family and community reunification.

• when the emergency phase is over

Children for whom no family member (parents or enlarged family) has been identified by the end of the search period, will be taken care of through foster care or adoption. They will be placed with families in their community, their country, or their family members living abroad, once these families are seen to be capable of ensuring their protection. It is to be expected that a number of parents who have lost children in the disaster will be ready to welcome others into their family. Moreover, the tradition of family and community solidarity is strong in Central America. It is therefore important that international assistance supports this solidarity rather than run counter to it.

• intercountry adoption

Only when all the above-mentioned steps and precautions have been taken, can intercountry adoption be considered. Other than intra-family adoption, it should only concern the few exceptional cases where no solution can be found for children in their country. It should under no circumstances be

arranged during the emergency phase and during the first year of reconstruction.

CONCLUSION

The signatories recommend that aid concentrates, on the one hand, on supporting families to ensure their survival, on emergency health and food programmes and the rapid reconstruction of family and community living areas and, on the other hand, on the rebuilding of various infrastructures as well as the renewal of agriculture and other sources of family income.

The signatories recommend that persons and organisations, wishing to help the children of Central America by showing them respect, honour the principles spelled out above and make their financial or professional contribution to the Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or Governmental Organisations that are committed to act to ensure that children are not separated from their family or their community - even temporarily - and that unaccompanied children be reintegrated in their family, their community or substitute homes in their country.

Young people concerned...

cont from p. 7

communicating with other people from round the world and Australia.

The project has so far involved students in Australia, Kenya, USA, Kyrgyzstan and Thailand. It operates through the I*EARN network which links students around the world in projects using the Internet. The work done in the project can be seen on the project website at:

<http://www.peg.apc.org/~bairnssec/marches>

The people involved in the child labour project are Ryan Hall, Sandra Grant, Samantha Johansen, Colin Broughton (Shub), Katrina Ringland, Jess McMahon and Nicholas Hurley. These are all students from Bairnsdale Secondary College in Victoria, Australia.

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