



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

# DISASTER CASE REPORT

Agency for  
International  
Development

Washington D.C.  
20523

## PANAMA - Bridge Collapse

Date: April 21, 1982 (FY 82)

Location: Chiriqui River, southeast of the city of David

No. Dead: Unknown, under 10

No. Affected: Temporary economic disruption affected nearly the entire country

Damage: Food shortage in Panama City area, gasoline shortage in western Panama

### The Disaster

On April 21, 1982, the collapse of a 150-meter suspension bridge over the Chiriqui River, southeast of the city of David, cut road communications on the Pan American Highway. No passable alternative route through this area exists. Sixty to seventy percent of all fresh food and a daily supply of 90,000 liters of milk normally reaches the metropolitan areas of Panama City and Colon via this route. Those cities on the western side of the bridge could not get their usual supply of gasoline from Panama City.

A causeway of corrugated sheet iron was built shortly after the disaster, but as soon as the rainy season began in mid-May, it was washed away. A pontoon bridge ordered from Great Britain could not be installed until at least mid-July. An interim structure was needed to restore the use of this vital artery. This was accomplished by installation of a Bailey bridge on June 24.

### Action Taken by the Government of Panama (GOP)

The Minister of Public Works and other senior military and civilian officials immediately went to the stricken area to supervise efforts to restore traffic. The Commander of the National Guard described the situation as a "national emergency".

In mid-May, the Vice President and National Guard Commander appealed to the United States for assistance in conducting an airlift and cooperation in putting a temporary bridge across the Chiriqui River.

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The Panamanian Air Force conducted a series of airlifts between David and Tocumen (near Panama City) to transport agricultural products and supplies, and between David and Gualaca (northeast of David on the other side of the Chiriqui) to transport people. One Panamanian Air Force Electra supplemented U.S. planes on the David-Tocumen route.

The GOP and the United States also conducted a ferry operation across the Chiriqui River until the bridge was completed. The GOP operated two large bow-ramp barges which could carry small trucks and cars. A large ocean-going ferry operated at the mouth of the river and along the coast. The GOP also constructed a foot bridge a few kilometers downstream from the collapsed bridge.

### Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

Because of the importance of restoring communications and travel on the Pan American Highway, U.S. Ambassador Moss responded favorably to the request for assistance from Panamanian officials. On May 20, 1982, he declared the Chiriqui bridge collapse a disaster.

Because no commercial aircraft were available, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) was asked to undertake the airlift of commodities between Tocumen and David. Chickens, cooking oil, butter, and eggs were taken to David, and fruits and vegetables were sent back to the Panama City area. DOD made 15 sorties at a total cost of \$83,260.

Six boat operators from the U.S. armed forces in Panama were sent to the area to ferry people and supplies across the river until the Bailey bridge could be finished. More than a million pounds of materiel were shuttled across the river in this way.

In early June, U.S. military engineers arrived to build a Bailey bridge. Panamanian laborers worked with the U.S. bridge team to erect the bridge, which was 125 meters long when completed, one of the longest of its kind.

One 20-foot bow-ramp barge, five 16-foot shallow draft utility boats, five outboard motors, five 5-gallon outboard fuel tanks, ten 5-gallon fuel cans, five accessory kits, one carryall truck, and one 9-ton tractor with a 40-foot flat bed trailer were released from a USG stockpile in Panama for use in the relief operation. The cost of the personnel and the transport of the stockpile equipment came to \$11,748.

TOTAL \$95,008

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Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

None reported.

Assistance Provided by the International Community

None reported.