ARGENTINA - Floods

Date: May - August 1983 (FY 83)

Location: Six northeastern provinces of Argentina: Formosa, Chaco, Misiones, Corrientes, Santa Fe, and Entre Rios

Deaths: None reported

No. Affected: 5,580,000

No. Homeless: 250,000 (4.5% of total population)

Damage: Total area affected by flooding was a 1,290 km stretch between the Paraguay border and Buenos Aires. Extensive damage occurred to the road and railway network, including at least 13 bridges destroyed. Much of northeastern Argentina's fertile cropland was destroyed, affecting especially the rice, sorghum, cotton, sugar cane, soybean, sunflower, tobacco, tea and vegetable crops. As of late May 1983, one source estimated that economic losses might reach one billion dollars. It has been predicted that some farmland will be unusable for two years and livestock production will be affected for the next three to four years.

The Disaster

During the winter months (May-August) of 1983, the northeastern provinces of Argentina suffered from heavy rainfall and serious flooding. Some meteorologists have blamed this unusually severe weather on "El Nino", a climatic anomaly characterized by the presence of warmer than normal water currents off the coast of Peru. Steady and heavy amounts of precipitation fell on Paraguay, southeastern Brazil and northeastern Argentina, causing the Parana, Paraguay, and Uruguay rivers to overflow their banks.

The most affected province was Formosa, which received 600 mm rain in a 24 hour period. The city of Formosa, on the Paraguay River, was entirely engulfed by flood waters causing 78,200 people to be displaced from their homes. In Resistencia, the capital of Chaco Province, runoff from the
Parana river opened a three meter wide gap in the city's embankment, forcing 80% of the population to abandon their homes and belongings. Approximately 6,000 residents of Posadas, the capital of the province of Misiones, had to be evacuated to temporary shelters. Overflow from the Uruguay River completely submerged the ports of Concepcion de la Sierra and San Javier and cut National Highway 12 in five places. The entire province of Corrientes, bounded by the Parana and Uruguay rivers, was declared a disaster area with eighty percent of the area (7,500,000 hectares) under water. In addition to approximately 200,000 displaced persons from these provinces, over 10,000 victims from neighboring Paraguay crossed over into Argentina seeking shelter.

By late June, the flood crest reached the provinces of Santa Fe and Entre Rios. In Santa Fe, Argentina's second most populous province, two million hectares of farmland were submerged and the area's cotton, sugar cane, sorghum, corn, and soybean crops were completely destroyed. The streets of the city of Santa Fe were covered with several centimeters of water, bringing all business and industrial activity to a standstill. Entre Rios Province was completely cut off from Buenos Aires when a bridge near Ceibes collapsed and most roadways were rendered impassable. The capital city of Buenos Aires was spared any serious flooding, as the Uruguay and Parana rivers empty into the Atlantic Ocean just north of the city. By October, the flood waters in the northern provinces began to recede, allowing evacuees to return to their homes and repair and restoration work to begin.

Action Taken by the Government of Argentina (GOA) and Local Voluntary Agencies

At the national level, both the GOA Air Force and Coast Guard dispatched helicopters and boats to evacuate flood victims and deliver supplies to evacuee centers. The national government also announced plans to implement several economic emergency measures for the population of the affected provinces, including tax exemptions, reduction of interest rates, budgetary allocations for foodstuffs and clothing, and appropriation of special funds for the construction of 5,000 houses.

Most of the provincial or local governments organized emergency operations committees and volunteer groups to coordinate preparedness measures and relief operations. Civil defense groups had to race against time to build earthen defenses before the oncoming flood waters flowed downstream. When the dike broke at the city of Resistencia, hundreds of volunteers worked nonstop to plug the gap with sandbags. Farther downstream in Santa Fe, civil defense groups, private construction companies, and volunteers worked together to construct flood barriers, some as high as ten meters. In Posadas, the emergency operations committee developed mass evacuation plans and resettlement sites for its displaced population.
Local voluntary agencies were also active in the evacuation and relief operations. The Argentine Red Cross used outboard motorboats to rescue flood victims and distribute relief supplies donated from other governments and private voluntary agencies. Caritas Argentinas, the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Argentina, and the Argentine Salvation Army were also involved in furnishing relief supplies, such as foodstuffs, blankets, mattresses, and construction materials.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

On June 7, 1983, U.S. Ambassador Harry W. Shlaudeman determined that the widespread flooding in six provinces of Argentina warranted USG assistance. The Ambassador's $25,000 disaster assistance authority was divided among the Argentine Red Cross, Caritas Argentinas, and the Argentine Salvation Army. The Argentine Red Cross reported that the USG donation of $10,000 was used to purchase three VHF portable radios and radio equipment for three high frequency base stations. Caritas divided its $10,000 USG contribution equally among seven affiliated offices in the flooded provinces for purchasing medical supplies, foodstuffs, and repair materials. The Salvation Army used its $5,000 USG donation to purchase blankets, rice, and powdered milk which were distributed to flood victims at evacuee centers.

In response to a request from Ambassador Shlaudeman, the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) sent two portable visual approach slope indicators (heliport light sets) to enable GOA helicopters to fly relief and supply missions at night. In addition, OFDA sent 5,000 wool blankets, 1,004 aluminum frame field cots, and 284 rolls of plastic sheeting (plus instruction manuals), which were turned over to the Argentine Red Cross. These commodities had an estimated value of $167,734. However, only the replacement cost of 51 rolls of plastic and the cost of transporting the supplies from Panama to Argentina were paid from FY 1983 accounts. A disaster specialist was also sent to Formosa, Chaco, and Santa Fe to assess the flood situation and relief operations.

Summary of USG Assistance

Ambassador's authority divided among Argentine Red Cross, Caritas Argentinas, and the Argentine Salvation Army..........$25,000

Heliport light sets and generators (two each) plus air transport..........................................................$12,988
Transport (air) of blankets, cots, plastic and instruction manuals.......................$105,135

Value of 51 rolls of plastic, including U.S. freight....................$14,288

Disaster specialist TDY......................................................$8,140

TOTAL $165,551

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

Catholic Relief Services - gave $5,000 in cash.

Lutheran World Federation - contributed $21,500 in cash donations.

TOTAL $26,500

Assistance Provided by the International Community

International Organizations

European Economic Community - gave $212,500 to the League of Red Cross Societies (LORCS) and $250,000 for a resettlement program.

LORCS - launched an appeal for $1.06 million and channeled relief funds from other international organizations.

United Nations Staff - donated $3,000 for local purchase of relief supplies.

UNCHS (Habitat) - sent a two week exploratory mission to advise on mitigation of damage and flood protection for human settlements.

UNDRO - delegate was briefed by government officials and visited affected areas.

UNESCO - provided assistance in reopening schools damaged by the floods.

UNICEF - contributed a cash grant of $25,000.

World Council of Churches - gave a cash contribution of $20,000 and reported that a total of $42,000 was contributed to its relief program.

Governments

Canada - provided $65,420 in cash through LORCS and $56,074 to the Canadian Organization for Development and Peace.

Germany, Federal Republic of - provided two fork lift trucks for delivering supplies, valued at $42,307.
Spain - sent boats for rescue operations valued at $10,577.

Soviet Union - provided medicines and blankets, value not reported.

Vatican - gave a cash donation of $20,000.

Through the Argentine Red Cross: cash contributions totaling $174,050 were reported from the following governments - Australia, Canada, China (P.R.), Denmark, Finland, Federal Republic of Germany, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, and United Kingdom.

Voluntary Agencies

A.D.B. (Netherlands) - contributed $5,000 in cash.

Australia Red Cross - gave a cash grant of $1,784.

Brazil Red Cross - provided 3,000 water purification tablets and 50 doses of antivenom serum, valued at $871.

Canada Red Cross - donated $9,731 in cash.


Caritas (Belgium) - gave a cash grant of $2,120.

Caritas (Germany, F.R.) - contributed $20,000 in cash.

Caritas (Italy) - donated $14,000 in cash.

Caritas (Netherlands) - donated $19,000 to relief effort.

Caritas (Spain) - gave a cash grant of $5,000.

Caritas (Switzerland) - contributed $25,000 in cash.

Chile Red Cross - provided a cash contribution of $240.

China (P.R.) Red Cross - contributed $10,000.

Das Kiakonisches Werk (Germany, F.R.) - gave a cash contribution of $19,650.

Denmark Red Cross - gave cash grant of $17,441.

Finland Red Cross - gave $28,193 in cash through LORCS.
Germany (F.R.) Red Cross - provided 67 boxes of medical supplies, two water purification units, and a technical assistance team, valued at $115,385.

HEKS (Switzerland) - contributed $9,640 in cash.

Italy Red Cross - gave $130,000 in cash through LORCS.

Japan Red Cross - donated $16,314 in cash.

Korea (Republic of) Red Cross - gave $1,000 in cash.

Netherlands Red Cross - contributed a cash grant of $9,433.

New Zealand Red Cross - gave a cash grant of $493.

Norway Red Cross - donated a cash grant of $42,252.

Paraguay Red Cross - provided the services of one PRC delegate, value not reported.

Soviet Union Red Cross - donated 2,000 blankets and other relief supplies, valued at $49,475.

Spain Red Cross - provided a SRC delegate, and two inflatable motorboats, value not reported.

Sweden Red Cross - furnished 34 tons of blankets, clothing, and shoes, valued at $25,675, and a cash grant of $12,162.

Switzerland Red Cross - gave a cash grant of $19,230.

Thailand Red Cross - gave $75 in cash through LORCS.

United Kingdom Red Cross - gave a cash contribution of $3,062.

TOTAL $1,550,139