Anticipating the Worst: OFDA's Hurricane Preparedness Pays Off

By Nancy McGuire

Before the winds of the first 2005 hurricane whipped through the Caribbean unexpectedly early in May, forecasters had already warned that the season would be extraordinarily active. Preparations for the upcoming hurricane season started at the end of the 2004 season. For OFDA's Latin America and Caribbean team, hurricane readiness requires the same dedication and forethought as all of our preparedness activities. This includes training local disaster managers and stockpiling relief supplies in OFDA's Miami warehouse, regardless of the seasonal forecast. Our "prepare for anything" philosophy has developed from years of experience working with communities devastated by even moderate tropical activity, such as Gonaïves, Haiti, in the wake of Tropical Storm Jeanne in 2004.

With an arsenal of proven preparedness strategies in hand, OFDA approached the 2005 season with confidence. Nineteen locally based OFDA disaster experts, led by four Costa Rica-based OFDA regional advisors, mobilized to respond swiftly both before and immediately after major storms. When Hurricane Emily headed to Grenada in July, OFDA staff arrived before the storm to finalize disaster response plans with local officials, USAID and U.S. Embassy staff, NGO partners, and U.N. agencies. Coupled with a training program that has reached 40,000 disaster management participants in the last decade, OFDA's robust capacity to support local disaster responders and USAID missions is a front line against the deadly and destructive force of hurricanes.

To foster key relationships with USAID colleagues in hurricane-prone countries, OFDA staff traveled to 14 missions during the spring and early summer of 2005 to work with other USG colleagues in updating country-specific Mission Disaster Relief Plans, the blueprints that U.S. embassies and USAID missions use for emergency responses. These sessions reinforced key messages about hurricane planning and safety measures designed to allow the embassies and missions to spring into action as needed. In addition, the sessions leveraged established relationships with OFDA staff, host country governments, NGOs, and U.N. organizations.

In May, OFDA hosted the first hurricane press conference at the Miami warehouse to raise public awareness of USG hurricane preparedness initiatives. By the official start of hurricane season on June 1, OFDA had packed 30,000 square feet of the warehouse with commodities—including blankets, hygiene kits, plastic sheeting, medical supplies, and water containers.

By the peak of hurricane season in late fall, OFDA had drawn on this stockpile five times—in response to hurricanes Emily, Stan, and Beta—with airlifts to Grenada, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. By strategically stockpiling commodities in Miami, OFDA ensured that these critical items could be dispatched into the hands of affected communities without delay. The warehouse's strategic location also allowed OFDA to transport supplies via commercial air-freight at a fraction of the cost of chartering aircraft.

Despite an unprecedented 15 hurricanes in 2005, OFDA's proactive approach to hurricane planning and response ensured that thousands of affected communities received urgently needed assistance. At the same time, OFDA's efforts expanded the capacities of local and national agencies to warn and evacuate residents to reduce loss of life and the amount of property damage. OFDA's year-round investments in preparedness—from raising community awareness and building local response capacity to laying the groundwork for our own future response—were central to the agile multi-country responses the 2005 season required.[7]

7 Responses to hurricanes that occurred after September 30, 2005, will be detailed in the OFDA FY 2006 Annual Report.

2005 Atlantic Hurricane Season

The 2005 Atlantic hurricane season produced an unprecedented 27 named storms, including 15 hurricanes. Five hurricanes—Dennis, Emily, Stan, Wilma, and Beta—and Tropical Storm Gamma tore through the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, devastating parts of the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

Hurricane Dennis made landfall in central Cuba on July 8 as a category four hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale, bringing sustained winds of 150 mph and triggering sea surges, floods, landslides, and heavy rains that also affected Haiti.

Hurricane Emily passed near Grenada on July 14 as a category one hurricane with 90 mph winds, just 10 months after Hurricane Ivan devastated the island.

Hurricane Stan made landfall south of Veracruz, Mexico, on October 4, as a category one hurricane with sustained winds of 80 mph, before weakening to a tropical storm and generating severe flooding across southern Mexico and Central America.

Hurricane Wilma hovered for more than 24 hours near Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, before making landfall in Cozumel on October 22, as a category four hurricane with sustained 140 mph winds.

Hurricane Beta made landfall on October 30, near Karabal and Sandy Bay, Nicaragua, as a category two hurricane with 110 mph winds.

Tropical Storm Gamma passed over the northern coast of Honduras on November 19, triggering heavy flooding in the northern departments. A low pressure system that developed on November 16 near the Honduras–Nicaragua border contributed to the flooding.

JUAN PABLO SARMIENTO, USAID

USAID staff unroll plastic sheeting that will temporarily shelter populations displaced by Hurricane Emily in Grenada.

What is the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale?

The Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale is a 1 to 5 rating based on a hurricane's intensity determined by wind speed. The rating also offers an estimate of the potential property damage and flooding expected along a coast from a hurricane landfall.

Category	Wind Speed (mph)	Storm Surge	Damage
1	74–95	4–5 ft	No real damage
2	96–110	6–8 ft	Some roofing, door, and window damage; considerable damage to shrubbery and trees
3	111–130	9–12 ft	Some structural damage to buildings; large trees blown down
4	131–155	13–18 ft	More extensive structural failures; shrubs, trees, and signs blown down; extensive damage to doors and windows
5	> 155	> 18 ft	Complete roof failure on many buildings; some complete building failures, with small buildings blown over; all shrubs, trees, and signs blown down; severe door and window damage