

Central Americans affected by hurricanes Eta, Iota desperately need our help | Opinion

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In Choluteca, Honduras, Padre Alejandro López Tuero is begging for blankets, tarps, plastic sheeting and beds as he tries to fulfill some of the overwhelming need of those who have lost everything to hurricanes Eta and Iota, two Category 4 storms that tore through Central America last month. Padre Alejandro leads Asociación San Jose Obrero, a Catholic care complex that is one of many faith-based ministries in the region, both Catholic and Protestant, that have sprung into action. They are helping those reeling from these latest storms in the strongest hurricane season Central America has experienced in 15 years.

On Nov. 3, Hurricane Eta struck, hovering for days over Nicaragua and the “Northern Triangle” countries — El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — causing deadly flooding and landslides that displaced thousands of people and left scores dead or missing. Just 13 days later, Hurricane Iota struck, making the situation worse and extending the impact to more areas in the region. Entire villages are covered in mud. Outreach centers, care facilities and churches, as well as entire populations they care for, overrun by landslides. With lands ripped up and crops and livestock wiped out, entire livelihoods have been destroyed.

More than 5 million people have been affected by these storms, according to the United Nations, all in the middle of a pandemic that shows no signs of going away. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the problems plaguing the region, including poverty, joblessness and violence — some of the drivers pushing families and children to migrate north in great numbers in recent years.

Padre Alejandro in Choluteca is running out of emergency supplies to help his community; so are the Arquidiócesis de Managua in Nicaragua, Asociación AGAPE in El Salvador, and the Hope of Life ministry in Guatemala, which provides humanitarian aid. There is just not enough support to help them and the many other centers working at the front lines to assist those affected by these hurricanes.

Donations are still needed. South Floridians can rest assured knowing that their donations and other aid will be delivered as expeditiously as possible through the efforts of experienced Miami and Broward County-based nonprofit organizations that facilitate assistance to those who need it most. International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), such as Americas Relief Team (ART), which is the disaster relief arm of the organization that I lead, Outreach Aid to the Americas and others have years of experience overcoming the many obstacles facing relief organizations in channeling aid to disaster-prone areas.

And those obstacles can be significant — severely damaged lines of communication and transportation venues, in-country police and military in disarray, a lack of orderly on-the-ground distribution points and even the desperation and frustration of victims dealing with injuries and the loss of loved ones.

The beauty of ART and other qualified INGOs is that we are able to overcome or sidestep many of these obstacles by careful planning and coordination with several partners, agencies and governments at various levels. Some examples are ART's corporate partners Chiquita Fresh North America, FedEx Express Latin America & Caribbean and Crossroads Alliance, of Ocala, which have safely collected or delivered countless tons of critical relief cargo to Honduras and the other affected countries at no charge to qualified INGOs.

Another key partner is the U.S. Southern Command's Joint Task Force-Bravo, which uses its unique military capabilities to help transport emergency food assistance and complete several search-and-rescue missions, saving hundreds of people marooned by floodwaters.

As we move into the holiday season and begin thinking about the new year, let us not forget our neighbors hundreds of miles away finding it difficult to see a light at the end of the tunnel of their situation. The need for hygiene items, food, clean water, blankets, tents, tarps, plastic sheeting, and other critical aid is still in great demand, and these are only the immediate needs. The disasters' effects will be felt for a long time, and there will be more opportunities to help.

But we can act to make a difference now. ART and other South Florida INGOs continue to work with Miami-Dade County and various foreign embassies of foreign nations to facilitate deliveries. Please, keep the help coming.

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