

July 6, 2005

Americas Relief Team Answers U.N. and OAS Concerns for Better Coordination of Disaster Relief to the Caribbean Basin

By Dr. Teo A. Babun and Julieta N. Valls

This hurricane season is already proving to be a busy and unusually active one. Americas Relief Team, a public-private consortium that helps Latin America and Caribbean countries in time of crisis and disasters, in the delivery of relief supplies, gears up to deliver expedited relief to the region.

Background

Four major hurricanes -- Charley, Frances Ivan and Jeanne -- plowed through the Caribbean region last year, causing an estimated \$7 billion in damage, mostly in the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti and Jamaica.

On June 1, U.N. humanitarian chief Jan Egeland said that North America and Europe should prepare to give more disaster aid to the Caribbean region, as hurricane forecasters predict the 2005 hurricane season to be especially active. "2005 could be worse than 2004, when we lost more than 5,000 lives in Haiti alone," Egeland said of the string of powerful hurricanes and storms that pummeled the region last year.

In the Cayman Islands, Ivan destroyed 70 percent of the buildings in Grand Cayman. In Grenada, only 170 of 10,000 destroyed homes have been rebuilt. And in Haiti, floods killed most of the people when Jeanne struck as a tropical storm.

At a recent Organization of American States' gathering in Fort Lauderdale, Caribbean leaders listed "sketchy disaster preparedness" as one of their main concerns.

AmericasRelief Team members believe that the main problem regarding disaster aid in the Caribbean region stems from a logistics bottleneck that keeps the relief aid from getting to those with the greatest needs.

During the 2004 hurricane season, the Caribbean region received massive relief efforts, from all of Florida. Much of the aid however, once collected, could not be shipped to those countries and was left for days and weeks at collection centers throughout the state. Unfortunately, the lack of logistical coordination kept many of the victims from receiving much needed relief supplies, such as water, food, and medical supplies.

In response to this crisis faced last year, AmericasRelief Team was formed to help Latin America and Caribbean countries in time of crisis and disasters, in the delivery of relief supplies at little or no cost. The consortium's team members have contacts with

governmental and non-governmental institutions in the affected countries and help identify the most urgent relief aid needs.

By the end of last year's hurricane season, AmericasRelief Team brought together more than 50 companies to address the issues of disaster response. The organization donated, processed, shipped and distributed more than \$18 million to those with the greatest needs, garnering them kudos from Major General Richard Mentemeyer of the U.S. Southern Command, Ambassador Charles E. Cobb, Chairman of Florida-FTAA and Florida Governor Jeb Bush.

Carnival Cruise Lines pre-hurricane season workshops helped train the Caribbean Consular Corps on best practices for hurricane preparedness, and FedEx Latin America provided its 747 to Miami-Dade County to help bring assistance and relief supplies to the disaster victims in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Florida disaster professionals can help our Caribbean neighbors increase institutional capacity by following the lead of successful programs, such as The Florida Association for Volunteer Action in the Caribbean and the Americas' (FAVACA) disaster preparedness training of Caribbean agencies and organizations. AmericasRelief Team member FAVACA uses Florida experts to help with post-trauma counseling, emergency management plan development, damage assessment, and other capacity building expertise.

Another way to help remove the relief aid distribution bottleneck is to help integrate local private sector partners. A project by AmericasRelief Team member and Washington DC-based, [the Pan American Development Foundation](#) helps empower the American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America and the Caribbean by assisting them in establishing a Disaster Committee with a disaster preparedness, mitigation, and response protocol. The initiative is sponsored by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).

The federal government, private corporations, and relief organizations can also help develop better linkages to leverage greater impact for resources available for disaster relief. To that end, Americas Relief Team has introduced a program to coordinate relief cargo space available from air and ocean cargo carriers operating in the Caribbean, but much more needs to be done.

Dr. Teo A. Babun, Jr. is the executive director of [AmericasRelief Team](#).

Julieta N. Valls is president of the Florida Association for Volunteer Action [in the Caribbean and the Americas \(FAVACA\)](#).

About AmericasRelief Team:

AmericasRelief Team is a Florida private sector collaboration of corporations and non-profit organizations created to help our Latin America and Caribbean friends in times of crisis and disasters. AmericasRelief Team reacts to immediate crisis, provides ongoing

logistics assistance, and conducts plans for future events in the region, which will require effective coordination of humanitarian relief.

For more information about AmericasRelief Team visit www.americasrelief.org.

About FAVACA:

The Florida Association for Volunteer Action in the Caribbean and the Americas (FAVACA) is a private, non-profit organization, established in 1982 to improve social and economic conditions in the region. FAVACA provides technical assistance and training through volunteers originating from Florida.

For more information about FAVACA visit www.favaca.org