

DISASTERS

PREPAREDNESS AND MITIGATION IN THE AMERICAS



Issue No. 65

News and Information for the International Disaster Community

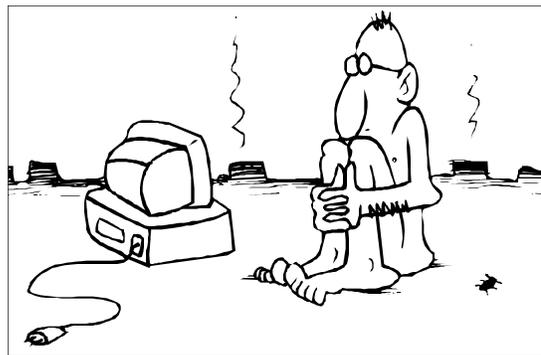
January 1996

Editorial

The Internet: Tending to the Basics

The Internet—virtually unknown among the general public and to the average disaster manager in Latin America and the Caribbean until some five years ago—is now a household name. The media reports daily about the limitless potential of this new technology. There are few emergency situations in which Internet has not been promoted as the miracle antidote to a lack of information or poor coordination. This is amply illustrated by the many global initiatives launched with great fanfare . . . and austere budgets.

No doubt the Internet has great potential for improving disaster management, but for this to happen, disaster managers from Latin America, the Caribbean and other disaster-prone regions must cull the essential from the nice (but superfluous) of “cyberspace.”



One of the basic advantages of the Internet is that it allows people to communicate—simply and cheaply. But, until more disaster managers have access to e-mail and discussion groups, the potential remains untapped.

commitments made when meeting face-to-face often fail because of a lack of follow-up communication after meetings. This could be easily corrected by employing simple, low-cost Internet features such as e-mail, file transfer and discussion groups—all excellent tools for maintaining the momentum gained in these intercountry meetings.

Once the initial investment in material and training is made, institutions have no budgetary excuse to restrict direct contact across agency and country borders. Indeed, communicating to an Internet address in Australia or the office across the corridor will cost basically the same.

Exchange among experts

Working in a narrow field of expertise—managing mass casualties after earthquakes, for instance—sharply limits the number of colleagues with similar expertise one is likely to meet locally.

The essential: a low-cost means of communication

Intercountry collaboration

For the last 20 years, PAHO’s disaster program has encouraged close cooperation between health sectors in countries of this Region. In fact, most contact between national counterparts takes place in meetings convened and supported by the Organization. However, the resolutions and shared

To maintain their expertise, health care disaster specialists must reach out to others with comparable skills. Group discussions on the Internet offer a low-cost alternative for professional exchange on very specialized topics, sometimes of interest for only a short period time. An example would be a discussion of the potential health impact of the eruption of the Cerro Negro in Nicaragua. In no time, local experts can consult with the most experienced specialists worldwide.

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News from PAHO/WHO

Workshop on Joint Civilian-Military Public Health Humanitarian Interventions



In early March, PAHO/WHO will sponsor a workshop in Arn Prior, rada, to examine the health role of for-nilitary forces in tarian assistance ns, based on recent experiences in the Caribbean. The objectives of the workshop are to promote early dialogue and planning between the military and civilian sectors of humanitarian relief operations in the Americas, increase public health benefits from military humanitarian interventions, and discuss alternative interventions.

Case studies will focus on operations in Haiti, and the role of foreign military in providing assistance after Hurricanes Luis and Marilyn.

For conclusions reached at the workshop, please contact the editor of this newsletter. □

HELP '96

Health Emergencies in Large Populations is a course intended for health professionals who may be called upon to deal with disaster situations. This year, the University of Hawaii's John A. Burns School of Medicine is hosting the course in Honolulu, from 29 April to 17 May 1996, with the sponsorship of the International Committee of the Red Cross and PAHO/WHO. Applications should be sent to the International Committee of the Red Cross, Medical Division, HELP'96-UH, 19 avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland; Tel: (022) 730-2810; Fax: (022) 733-9674. □

Diploma in Emergency Management

The World Health Organization and University of Geneva are organizing the

International Diploma Course in Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Management from 2 to 28 June 1996 in Geneva. It is designed to cover a wide range of issues, including: epidemiology of major emergencies, search and rescue, first aid, disaster medicine, logistics management, public health aspects of emergencies, and international resource mobilization. Those interested in applying from Latin America or the Caribbean should submit their applications through the country PAHO/WHO Representatives to WHO/HQ, Division of Emergency and Humanitarian Action/Emergency Preparedness Unit by 15 March 1996. No financial assistance is available for individuals in this Region. For more information, please contact, DHA/EPP, WHO, 20, Ave. Appia, CH-1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland; Fax: (41-22) 791-4844. □

Final Announcement

International Conference on Disaster Mitigation in Health Facilities

Mexico City 26-28 February 1996

PAHO/WHO is organizing the International Conference —Disaster Mitigation in Health Facilities— which will take place in Mexico City from 26 to 28 February 1996. The agenda includes the presentation of case studies on the impact of disasters on the health sector in Latin America and the Caribbean, policies on structural, nonstructural and organizational aspects of mitigation, and policies on financing. Guidelines will be presented for developing cost-effective interventions, comprehensive national programs, and national hospital mitigation plans.

Co-sponsors of the Conference include: the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Interior of Mexico, the Regional Office of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), World Bank, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and Organization of American States (OAS).

For more information please contact: Pan American Health Organization, Emergency Preparedness Program, 525 Twenty-third Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, USA, Tel: (202) 861-4324; Fax: (202) 775-4578; e-mail: disaster@paho.org

Other Organizations

Human Settlements at Risk: IDNDR Day 1996

Disasters and urbanization will be the focus of this year's International Day on Natural Disaster Reduction, to be observed on 9 October 1996. The IDNDR Secretariat is preparing a publication on the topic to be presented at the June 1996 Second U. N. Conference on Human Settlement (Habitat II) in Istanbul,

Turkey. The target audience for the book will be mayors and city administrators.

The Secretariat is seeking examples of successful disaster prevention and preparedness programs in urban areas for publication and/or presentation at workshops convened to examine vulnerability in urban areas. These could relate to housing, infrastructure, health services, education, public information, evacuation, etc. The Secretariat would also like

to receive information on successful implementation of Disaster Impact Assessments or Environmental Impact Assessments with a disaster reduction component, and statistics relating to the impact of disasters in urban areas. Please send material to: IDNDR Secretariat, DHA, Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland. Tel: (41-22)798-5850; Fax:(41-22) 733-8695. □



One important objective of the Supplies Management project (SUMA), is to provide support to and exchange expertise with those managing relief operations outside of Latin America and the Caribbean. We've received the following reports on SUMA from outside this Region.

Red Cross Used SUMA in Rwanda Relief

Lynn Orstad, International Disaster Coordinator for the Fraser Region of the Canadian Red Cross Society, sent us the following report on her use of SUMA in Rwanda Relief Operations. Ms. Orstad can be reached c/o CRC, Ste 207-88 Tenth Street, New Westminster, B.C., V3M 6H8, Canada.

The Rwanda exodus in April 1994 was the largest movement of refugees the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies had been involved in since World War II. The logistics and management of donated goods, human resources and other needs was overwhelming. However, before leaving Canada, I was given the manuals for SUMA Central and Terminal operations along with computer discs. While reading the manuals en route to Africa, I realized that it would make a significant difference in the organization of this huge undertaking.

When I arrived in the tiny village of Ngara, Tanzania (where refugees had crossed the Rwanda border), there was no system in place to inventory relief aid pouring into the country. There was gen-

eral confusion (which is normal at the onset of any operation) as to what should be done and how. Within a short time I obtained a laptop computer and began to put the SUMA Program into operation. I gathered pieces of paper with mere notes scratched on them, tracked down people who had received goods, and searched for waybills; all this information was recorded in the SUMA Program.

Reports were quickly printed and sent to Federation Headquarters in Geneva. Using SUMA, relief workers were able to track medicines, food supplies and human resources; the methodology assisted the German Red Cross water team with water and environmental health needs. After working on several disasters over the years, I am convinced that SUMA will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of relief aid reaching the most vulnerable. □

Latin American Experts Visit Bosnia-Herzegovina

The conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the multiple agencies involved in humanitarian assistance, have made communicating the status of the transport, storage, and distribution of relief supplies very difficult. The WHO Regional Office

for Europe is working to improve the management of medical supplies with local health authorities, and recently invited two SUMA experts from Colombia and Costa Rica to examine systems at work in Mostar, Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica, providing them the opportunity to explore expanded applications for the SUMA methodology.

The experts noted that adopting a single supply management system at the onset of humanitarian assistance efforts would save agencies from having to develop their own information systems. SUMA is flexible enough to meet the needs of a wide range of users, and would facilitate the exchange of information among local authorities, UN agencies, NGOs and others. □

For more information on SUMA activities, please contact the Emergency Preparedness Program, PAHO/WHO, 525 23rd St., NW, Washington, DC 20037, USA; Fax: (202) 775-4578; e-mail: disaster@paho.org



Member Countries

Southern Cone Countries: Meeting of Health Disaster Coordinators



In September 1995, coordinators from health sector disaster programs in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay met in Buenos Aires to examine their countries' progress in disaster prevention and response initiatives, particularly in the area of emergency medical treatment and hospital preparedness. Primary objectives at the meeting were to strengthen information exchange and to establish bilateral and multilateral agreements on procedures during disasters, especially between countries with common borders and shared vulnerability to hazards. For more information on these initiatives contact the Subregional Advisor, Emergency Preparedness Program, OPS/OMS, San Javier 295 y Francisco de Orellana, Quito, Ecuador; Fax: (59-32) 46-4630; e-mail: poncelej@paho.org □

Venezuela: International Conference

Venezuela will host the International Conference on Disaster Management—National Experiences in Disaster Response and Rehabilitation from 11 to 14 October 1996 in Merida, Venezuela. Presentations are invited on a wide range of topics including: national experiences in disaster management systems, search and rescue, damage and needs assessment, reinforcement of damaged buildings, evacuation, forensic medicine, economic and social effects of disasters.

The conference organizers request that individuals or institutions interested in presenting papers submit an abstract for consideration no later than 30 March in either Spanish or English. For more information please contact: Comité Organizador, Apartado Postal 344, Merida 5101, Venezuela. Tel/Fax (58-74) 634-773; 442-076; e-mail: confmer@bolivar.funmrd.gov.ve or alejo@bolivar.funmrd.gov.ve □

Ecuador Library Network Inaugurated

Access to basic information on disaster management continues to be an obstacle

for health workers and other professionals in most countries of this Region. Directors of medical science and hospital libraries in Ecuador have made a commitment to collect and disseminate scientific information on disaster management to the university and medical communities. Forty three hospitals and universities in four regions of Ecuador will make up the network. The Regional Disaster Documentation Center in Costa Rica will provide database searches and cooperate in supplying materials to the libraries.

This library network for disaster information should be of special help for medical students in Ecuador. The curriculum for students in their first and final years of medical school will now include courses on Disaster and Emergency Response. For more information on these initiatives contact the Subregional Advisor for Emergency Preparedness, PAHO/WHO, San Javier 295 y Francisco de Orellana, Quito, Ecuador; Fax: (59-32) 46-4630; e-mail: poncelej@paho.org □

Barbados: Disaster and Emergency Medicine Course

As part of the University of West Indies' program in emergency medicine, an intensive course on Disaster and Emergency Medicine will take place in Barbados from 13 to 29 March. The course is organized by the University of West Indies and PAHO in association with the Barbados Defense Force and Barbados Heart Foundation. For more information on the course, please contact: Dr. H. Thani, Course Director, Accident and Emergency Department, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, St. Michael, Barbados; Tel: (809) 426-2029.

Tradewinds 1996

An important yearly event for disaster managers in the Caribbean is Trade-

(cont. on pg. 5)

Chile: International Seminar on Medical Response in Disasters

From 24 to 26 April 1996, the Health Services of Viña del Mar in Quillota, Chile, will host an international seminar on the health sector's response during disasters. The organizers want to provide the opportunity for disaster managers from health and other sectors, and from national, international and nongovernmental institutions to establish contact and work toward better coordination of their resources. The seminar agenda includes sessions on critical health resources, prehospital and hospital preparedness, training, and communications; one day will be devoted to the health sector's response in the event of chemical disasters. The Chilean Ministry of Health, National Emergency Office (ONEMI) and PAHO/WHO are co-sponsors of the event. For more information, please contact: Dr. Pedro Olivares Tirado, Hospital de Quilpue, Quillota, Chile; Tel: (56-32) 910-445/910-436/910-947; Fax: (56-32) 921-875/926-837. □

(from pg. 4)

winds—a simulation of a multi-hazard event. This year, the event is being hosted by the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in April. Several hundred participants are expected from the Regional Security System, Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency, U.S. military and numerous regional and international agencies. □

First Latin American Conference on Chemical Accidents

More than 300 persons working in aspects of chemical accident response met in Buenos Aires in November 1995 for the First Latin American Conference

on Chemical Accidents, organized by CIQUIME, the Information Center for Chemical Emergencies. Following are some of the Conference recommendations:

- Develop emergency plans that clearly define the roles of each responding institution. Involve different sectors in simulating these plans.
- Develop a standardized registry of chemical accidents for the entire Region.
- Convene multi-sectoral workshops to improve legislation on hazardous materials.
- Sponsor studies on procedures and sites for disposal of hazardous materials.
- Support training at both decision-making and operative levels in response agencies.

As a follow-up to the Conference, CIQUIME is sponsoring a workshop on standardizing registration of chemical accidents in Argentina. Health personnel, firefighters, and police will work to develop a single format.

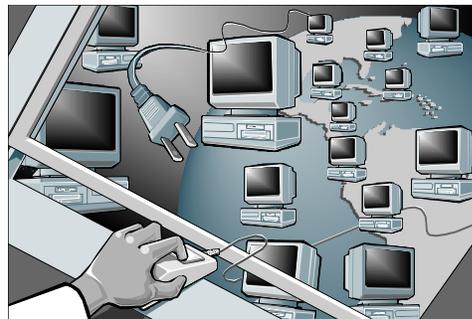
CIQUIME has also set up a discussion list using the Internet. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to: listserv@cique.sld.ar with the command: *subscribe chemacc <your name>* in the body of the message. For more information on CIQUIME activities, please contact Diego Gotelli, CIQUIME, Av. San Pedrito 220, 1406 Buenos Aires, Argentina; Tel: (541) 612-6912/613-1100; Fax (541) 613-3707; e-mail: postmaster@cique.sld.ar □

Central American Experts Call for Greater Access to the Internet

With support from NASA, the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Central American disaster specialists from a variety of sectors—health, civil defense—met with information systems managers and representatives of the telecommunications industry in Managua, Nicaragua, last November to promote greater access to electronic sources of information. This was a policy-level meeting rather than a training session, and focused on identifying needs for access to the Internet. The participants concluded the following:

- The countries of Central America, and particularly the disaster community, need wider access to the Internet and the services it provides, at a fixed, affordable cost. The technology exists but there are still countries where access is not available or service is unreliable.
- Acknowledging that there are costs associated with the use of the Internet, the cost-benefits of its use for disaster management must be “sold” to decision-makers in Central America.
- Access to and use of the Internet must be democratized. By this the group understands that everyone showing the need should have unrestricted access to the Internet. Connecting first individuals, and then institutions, will provide an ever expanding network.
- The participants considered that the best interests of all sectors would be served—the health sector of Central America and the disaster community at large—if they were to unite efforts to gain access to this technology.
- At this stage it is not necessary to create new services or develop even further the sophisticated services that already exist. The health sector needs to expand access to what is already available to an even wider audience. The idea was not to turn disaster managers into information systems engineers, but to make the information technology community aware of the needs of the disaster community.

This workshop was an important part of Phase I of this project. Its principal objective is to create the beginnings of an electronic network that provides a quick, inexpensive, and reliable way for disaster managers to communicate with each other. □



Review of Publications

Natural Hazards Center Publishes Quick Response Reports

The Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, is a national and international clearinghouse for information on natural hazards and human adjustments to hazards and disasters. In addition to the bimonthly newsletter, *Natural Hazards Observer*, the Center publishes monographs, working papers, and bibliographies.

The Center administers a program, with the support of the National Science Foundation, that enables social scientists to conduct research at the site of disaster immediately after it occurs. The findings from these studies are published by the Center in brief Quick Response Reports. A sample of recent titles (available in English only):

Self Organization in Disaster Response and Recovery: The Maharashtra India Earthquake of September 30, 1993 (by Louise K.

Comfort, 1995, 42 pp., order no. QR74)

Farmers' and Public Responses to the 1994-1995 Drought in Bangladesh: a Case Study (by Bimal Kanti Paul, 1995, 50 pp., order no. QR76—also available on the World Wide Web)

Field Report: Investigation of September 2, 1992 Nicaragua Tsunami (by Jane Preuss, 15 pp., order no. QR66)

The reports cost \$US5.00 plus postage. To place an order, please contact the Publications Clerk, Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, IBS#6, Campus Box 482, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colo. 80309-0482, USA; Tel: (303) 492-6819; Fax: (303) 492-2151; e-mail: jlark@spot.colorado.edu.

In 1996 the Quick Response Reports will be distributed for free via the World Wide Web. They can be accessed from: <http://adder.colorado.edu/~hazctr/qr/qr.html>

To receive a complete Hazards Center publications list, send \$3.00 to the above address or view the list on the World Wide Web at: <http://adder.colorado.edu/~hazctr/Home.html>

New Video from PAHO—Managing Relief Supplies Following Disasters

This video addresses the importance of avoiding what is often termed the “Second Disaster”, by managing what can be an unpredictable and overwhelming flood of relief supplies following major natural or manmade disasters. The video gives an overview of the Supply Management Project (SUMA), a methodology developed to quickly sort and inventory large amounts of relief supplies and provide information on these supplies to national authorities, relief agencies, and donors. The video also provides guidelines on requesting emergency assistance for countries affected by a disaster, and guidelines for potential donors. Available in English and Spanish from: Pan American Health Organization, Emergency Preparedness Program, 525 Twenty-third Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, USA, Tel: (202) 861-4324; Fax: (202) 775-4578; e-mail: disaster@paho.org 

Upcoming Meetings

January-March: “Virtual” Seminar

If you have access to the Internet you can join professionals from Japan, Peru, and other countries in a seminar organized by QUIPUNET on lessons learned from the Kobe earthquake. From 17 January through 17 March, a weekly paper will be presented, participants will direct questions to the author, and summaries of that week’s discussion will be posted. To participate, send a message to: listasrcp@rcp.net.pe In the body

of the message, type: *subscribe kobe* For further information contact: delgado@bach.taisei.co.jp

March 1996

The 1996 National Disaster Medical System Conference, sponsored by the U.S. Public Health Service, will be held in San Diego, California, from 16 to 21 March 1996. For additional information, contact: NDMS, 5600 Fishers Lane, Room 4-81, Rockville MD 20857, USA; Tel: (800) USA-NDMS, ext. 444; Fax:

(301) 443 5146.

June 1996

The Sixth World Conference on Disaster Management will be held in Hamilton, Ontario, from 16 to 21 June 1996. Sponsored by the Canadian Center for Emergency Preparedness, it promises much of interest particularly for disaster managers in the health sector. For more information contact the Center for Emergency Preparedness; Tel: (800) 965-4608 or (905) 546-3911.

Access to scientific libraries

In developing countries few are blessed with free access to scientific literature. Libraries and universities are cutting their subscriptions under budgetary pressure. Access to foreign libraries is far from easy or cheap. The strength of the Internet is that it democratizes access to the information stored in millions of computer databases such as the U.S. National Library of Medicine, UN documentation centers, or countless FTP sites. Much of the database of the PAHO/IDNDR Regional Disaster Documentation Center is already accessible through the Internet, and soon the entire collection will be available. This democratization does have certain limits, since the Internet is reserved for those who are computer literate (and equipped) and have access to a reliable telephone line! Not every disaster manager is that fortunate.

The nice ... but superfluous

Graphics

We feel that too much emphasis is placed on the graphics capability of the Internet (and Windows). We should judge the cake primarily by its nutritional value and taste and not by the glossy icing. Downloading photos and graphics may be nice and occasionally important but should not be pursued at the expense of more accessible and critical text-based communication features. PAHO's decision to maintain its Gopher (text only) and to refrain from using sophisticated graphics on its WWW home page should be emulated.

Specialized networks

Specialized regional or global disaster or health networks have been established, but basically are "home pages" offering general information. Their value, like that of any traditional newsletter or informal publication, varies. While they may be very useful sources of information, especially when designed for a well-defined audience, they are no substitute for dialogue within Latin America and the Caribbean through e-mail and group discussions.

The Internet's darker side

The negative side of the Internet comes from its very strength: its unregulated, often chaotic nature. Free, unbridled exchange of information can result in a confusion of choices, and a profu-

sion of the pseudo-scientific, politically motivated, disguised commercial, or clearly unethical material. "Surfing the net" will require more sophistication and greater skepticism. There is no editor or review board to catch the most obvious abuses. The reputation of the source (agency or individual) and rigor of the scientific argument are more critical than ever in judging the value of the "information." The Internet's power as a communication tool has not been grossly misused in the disaster field . . . yet. The time will come when unsubstantiated earthquake "predictions" or unfounded rumors (so common after disasters) will immediately find a global audience. This hazard is another compelling reason for disaster officials to monitor and react to material on the Net.

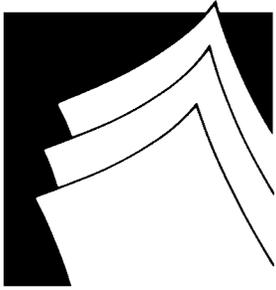
The international community and the Internet

Disaster management can only benefit from rapid and widespread access to the most basic and essential text-based features of the Internet. Free access to information and routine dialogue across borders will have a more profound effect on societies than can be estimated.

Photographs and graphics should not be pursued at the expense of more accessible and critical text-based communications features.

It is particularly worrisome to note that almost all international funding and political support has been directed to improving disaster databases and information that is available to the same circle of international actors who, with little effort, have access to enormous amounts of data. Those already connected to the Internet are the only beneficiaries of most of these international initiatives. Only meager resources are being made available to broaden the user base in developing countries, where there is a real need to bridge the information gap.

Delaying access to the Internet in Latin America and the Caribbean, whether by inertia, conservatism, or under the pretext of preventing possible abuse or misuse, is tantamount to burning the printing presses in the middle ages or banning photocopiers in this century. The result will be a rapid widening of the gap between the haves and have-nots of the information era, a determining factor for development. □



Selected Bibliography

The articles listed in this section may be of interest to health professionals and others responsible for disaster preparedness, mitigation and relief. They have been reproduced and recently added to the collection of articles available from the Editor of this Newsletter. A complete list of reprints is available upon request. Please quote the reference code listed to the left of the publication title when requesting articles.

- P.3** Mezcuca Rodríguez, Julio, “¿Ha aumentado el riesgo de terremotos en el último año?” *Protección Civil*, No. 25, pp. 4-7, July, 1995.
- P.4** Kaneda, Masaki, “Injury distributions produced by natural disasters,” *Asian Med. J.*, Vol. 37, No. 10, pp. 557-63, 1994.
- R.1** Carby, Barbara E., and Rafi Ahmad, “Vulnerability of roads and water systems to hydro-geological hazards in Jamaica,” *Built Environment*, Vol. 21, No. 2/3, pp. 145-53.
- R.2** Ferguson, Earl W., et al., “Telemedicine for national and international disaster response,” *Journal of Medical Systems*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 121-23, 1995.
- R.3** Meyer, M. Ursula, et al., “Health professional’s role in disaster planning,” *AAOHN Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 5, pp. 251-62, May 1995.
- R.4** Covello, Vincent T., “Communication et perception des risques,” *Revue Canadienne de Santé Publique*, Vol. 86, No. 2, pp. 80-82, March-April, 1995.
- R.5** Cruz, Miguel F. and Roy Acuña, “Diseño sismo-resistente del Hospital de Alajuela —un enfoque integrador.”

Disasters: Preparedness and Mitigation in the Americas is the Newsletter of the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Program of the Pan American Health Organization, Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization. The reported events, activities and programs do not imply endorsement by PAHO/WHO, nor do the statements made necessarily represent the policy of the Organization. The publication of this *Newsletter* has been made possible through the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance of the U.S. Agency for International Development (OFDA/AID).

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