Central America: Community action plan for the reconstruction

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PURPOSE : to propose a Plan of Action for the Reconstruction of Central America following Hurricane Mitch. CONTENT : the overall objective of the programme is to help rehabilitate and improve the infrastructure, facilities and the administration of education and public health services in the areas hit hardest by the hurricane in October 1998. It should be recalled that the hurricane was the cause of nearly 10 000 people losing their lives; also, a similar number of people remain unaccounted for. As well as the heavy loss of human life, the hurricane directly or indirectly affected almost 6.7 million people (nearly 20% of the total population). The damage has been put at 5.36 billion EURO. Community intervention was seen to be necessary with a view to supporting the rehabilitation of social infrastructures of the people hardest hit by the hurricane, to solving the problem of housing and to bringing emergency aid to the basic culture, all contributing to reducing or preventing the impact of such disasters via a model of sustainable development which is decentralised and includes all parties concerned. The programme concerns 4 countries of Central America : El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala and is spread over a period of 4 years, 1999-2002 (the financial package annexed to the Communication allocates EUR 250 million from the budget heading B7-313 "Rehabilitation", with any shortfall being covered by a transfer within the budget chapter. The programme will pursue the following specific objectives : - the rehabilitation, improvement and expansion of education and public health infrastructure and facilities; - the strengthening of education and public health services to improve their efficiency, quality and accessibility , especially for the poorest sections of the population; - the improvement of the management capacities of government institutions responsible for education and public health provisions; - the promotion of the drafting and implementation of local rehabilitation and development plans based on public consultation and participation; - support for the preparation and introduction of a legal framework aimed at preventing or reducing the impact of natural disasters of this kind. A strong anti-fraud system is foreseen following the principle of decentralisation, working directly with the Commission services in Brussels and the Commission Delegations in the region (implementation of the programme will be inspected on the spot at every stage of the project cycle by the Commission to ensure the required coordination and complementarity with the Member States and local partners). However, in order to ensure this is carried out effectively, the Commission will need to send a number of officials to the delegations and will ask for the creation of 20 posts for additional officials. Other options are envisaged if the Commission does not obtain the necessary human resources (either a technical assistance office (TAO) working on the spot under the authority of the Head of Delegation responsible and the provision of additional funding from the budget for the creation of this TAO, or local staff or Member State or other experts would have to berecruited and would have to be funded from part B of the Community budget. This latter option has the disadvantage of being less transparent and more limiting from the administrative point of view (limited duration of contracts, difficulty to apply the principle of deconcentration). This is why the Commission is asking via the current communication that, the Council and the Parliament take a decision to approve the action plan for the reconstruction of Central America and its mode of operation.