



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
*Regional Office of the*  
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

**EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND  
DISASTER RELIEF COORDINATION PROGRAM**  
**Activation of SUMA following Hurricane Luis**

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Hurricane Luis struck the Caribbean region from 4 September to 6 September, severely affecting, among others, the islands Antigua & Barbuda, St. Kitts & Nevis and St. Maarten. Extensive damage to housing left thousands of people homeless. Water and electricity supply was disrupted. Damaged roofs and walls of hospitals led to the evacuation of patients and losses in medical supplies and equipment. Following is a summary of SUMA activities in the aftermath of Hurricane Luis.

**Antigua:**

On 6 September, when the airport in Antigua opened, a fully equipped SUMA team arrived and was ready when the first flight with donated relief supplies arrived on 7 September. The inventorying of relief supplies was conducted largely at the airport itself. The SUMA Team set up operations at the international airport alongside the military personnel of the Caribbean Disaster Relief Unit (CDRU), who were responsible for off-loading supplies from arriving aircraft.

The SUMA Team consisted of two members from Barbados, one from Jamaica, two from Saint Lucia and one from Costa Rica.

Daily reports were printed at the SUMA CENTRAL level, which was set up at the

Antigua Emergency Operations Center (EOC). These reports were utilized by the Government of Antigua & Barbuda to match requests to donors and supplies actually received. Copies of reports were also supplied to donors for verification of arrival of donations in Antigua.

**St. Kitts & Nevis:**

The government of St. Kitts and Nevis also requested the activation of SUMA in their country. In response, two SUMA Team members left from Antigua to St. Kitts & Nevis to set up SUMA operations on 10 September.

Aside from training national volunteers, time was dedicated to supervising and advising the local teams, who were in control of SUMA operations. The PAHO led Team handed over the SUMA operations and two laptop computers to the local teams upon departure. Periodic checks were made from Barbados with the local SUMA Teams. In this way, questions were answered and any problems encountered were solved in a timely manner.

**St. Maarten:**

A two-member SUMA Team was also deployed to Curaçao. Four SUMA members from the Venezuelan Civil Defense were also deployed to Curaçao to assist the local authorities on 7 September.

All relief supplies destined for St. Maarten were initially sent through Curaçao since the airport in St. Maarten was temporarily closed to all commercial traffic. The Department of Public Health and Environmental Hygiene, based in Curaçao, coordinated the assistance to St. Maarten. A committee established by the Department of Public Health, the Joint Service Club and the National Red Cross defined as first priority to using the SUMA system to inventory existing relief supplies, and sent only those supplies needed on to St. Maarten.

A big advantage of inventorying at the point of exit (Curaçao) is that all supplies arrived in St. Maarten already sorted, classified and inventoried, considerably relieving local

authorities of the affected island.

In Curaçao, the SUMA Team trained national volunteers in the operation of SUMA. When the St. Maarten airport opened the team moved to St. Maarten to train additional volunteers, since flights had begun arriving from other countries. Operations in St. Maarten faced several problems because of difficulties in coordination and communication between the Central Government of the Netherlands Antilles in Curaçao, the local Government of St. Maarten, the Dutch Navy operationally in charge, and the Operations Center in The Hague, Netherlands. By the time the SUMA Team was able to work in St. Maarten, many relief supplies had already entered the country.

**Conclusions and lessons learned:**

In small Caribbean islands (average 150,000 inhabitants), there is currently limited capacity for establishing national SUMA Teams. Inevitably, the activity takes an international dimension as the local volunteers, few in number, are unavailable for professional reasons or because of pressing personal responsibilities in the aftermath of a hurricane. This is in contrast to Latin America where more personnel are available. While one solution would be to exchange volunteers between the two sub regions, exchange is limited by language problems.

Training of new national volunteers was necessary, as previously trained local persons were not available for SUMA duties (in Antigua & Barbuda and St. Kitts & Nevis) following the hurricane. In Curaçao and St. Maarten no training had ever been organized. SUMA operations were handed over to these newly trained persons. All SUMA Teams performed their duties commendably in spite of being trained under very difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, in the case of hurricanes, the solidarity existing between neighboring islands can not be fully exercised as most are either affected or threatened by the same storm and consequently are unable to divert human resources.

The implementation of SUMA in Curaçao was very successful, demonstrating national authorities its efficiency in preventing the chaos of inventorying and classifying donated relief

supplies.

**Recommendations:**

- expand the group of well trained and experienced volunteers for "first call" designation. At present we have a regional team of 5 consultants able to lead, coordinate and implement SUMA under difficult international conditions in the Caribbean. This is not sufficient during an active hurricane season, forcing us to rely on PAHO staff and SUMA volunteers from Latin America.
- Identify additional capable persons (outside PAHO/WHO and the core group mentioned above) who can be designated team coordinators for the SUMA Team when deployed. An agreement should be established with their employers to ensure deployment when needed.
- Specify the role and responsibilities of the SUMA Team Coordinator more clearly. The diversity of operational and political contexts require great flexibility. Special SUMA coordinator training should be developed and organized, to address these issues.
- Formalize the "volunteer" relationship between SUMA Team members and PAHO in a written document of mutual agreement regarding: stand-by status, procedures for mobilization and deployment, operational procedures when deployed, logistics of operations, and responsibilities of team members.
- Give SUMA training to military personnel (where available) in cases where volunteers are unable to come forward for SUMA activities in their own countries. The Regional Security Services (RSS) has played a very positive role in logistic support in the Caribbean. Their collaboration with the civilian authorities was excellent.
- Appoint a SUMA focal point in each island for purposes of communications,

information dissemination, and coordination of activities. Ideally the focal point should have no other responsibilities during disaster situations. This measure is likely to become more realistic as more governments realize the potential benefit of accountability through SUMA.

- Organize a regional meeting of SUMA Team members to discuss and review SUMA policies, update SUMA Team Manual, and participate in SUMA training.