

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN DISASTER ASSISTANCE AND COORDINATION TEAM ARRIVES IN MEXICO

(New York, 7 November 2007): In the aftermath of the floods and landslides that hit the Tabasco and Chiapas states leaving at least 500,000 people homeless, an emergency team sent to Mexico by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has arrived in the country today.

The five-member United Nations Disaster Assistance and Coordination (UNDAC) team, lead by Ms. Nidya Quiroz, a UN disaster management consultant, includes two UN staff members from OCHA Geneva, a liaison official from the Costa Rican National Commission of Risk Prevention and Emergency Relief, and a programme advisor from the Panama office of the World Food Programme (WFP), who will be able to assist with needs assessment, vulnerability analysis, and emergency information management. The head of the OCHA Regional Office in Panama, Gerard Gomez, who arrived in the country's capital last week, will also support the emergency team. In addition, the team will receive further assistance from two Télécoms Sans Frontières specialists, including a Southeast Asia delegate associated with the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, and an additional WFP Panama official. The team will assist Mexican authorities and the UN Resident Coordinator's Office with their response to the disaster.

In response to the disaster, the Government of Mexico has engaged the country's army, National Water Commission, Health Department, and local authorities, as well as the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CENAPRED). On November 5, the President of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, announced a fiscal amnesty for Tabasco State to facilitate rehabilitation and reconstruction in the affected areas. The Government followed by announcing US\$ 18.5 million reconstruction fund for the State.

The international community, for its part, has already offered assistance to the country. The Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) mobilized specialists to distribute supplies and medicines, while WFP has sent food. Other international organizations have also sent personnel and supplies to the country. Donations are being received from governments, institutions and individual donors.

Even though the emergency response of Mexican authorities was immediate, the situation in the region remains dire. It will take at least another two weeks before the waters recede to their normal levels. Lack of drinking water, shelter and food caused a massive exodus from the state of Tabasco, where thousands of people are still awaiting rescue from floodwaters. No official numbers regarding deaths and casualties have been confirmed yet. Between the two states, with over 1 million people affected by the floods, only 62,000 people remain in shelters and approximately 10,000 families are receiving assistance, while another 20,000 people continue living in their flooded households despite the government's recommendations to leave. Meantime, access to the area is still limited with over 200 kilometers of roads blocked.