

Disaster Preparedness

— it can happen here

Are you ready for a real emergency?

By the second day after the earthquake that devastated most of the cities in Guatemala, it was easy to know where the victims were buried: The smell of decomposing bodies guided the rescue workers. Removing the debris and

taking out the corpses was a very painful and grueling job.

Back in Miami, after three days covering the disaster for the *Miami Herald*, I still had the stench deep in my nostrils. As I was looking at the

prints coming out of the dryer, memory of the smell gave an added dimension to my thoughts. For a few seconds I believed I was still there, and in my ears I heard the voice of the little girl who sat in the dirt near the field hospital, crying, "Where is Mama? Where is Mama?"

When you are in this kind of situation, you are unable to believe that it could happen in your country, your city, your community . . .

But you are dead wrong, old man . . . This can happen to you and to your town, any time, any second. Are you prepared to cope with such a situation?

You are a ham radio operator, and your duty in disaster circumstances is to establish communications in the shortest period of time. That is what amateur radio is all about. We have a responsibility, and we must act accordingly.

Check Equipment

After you read this article, go into your shack and take inventory of your equipment. Then go to the main power switch (yes, the one in the rectangular gray box!) and turn the power off. Back in the

shack, find out if you can call a fellow ham in Washington DC and tell him that there was an atomic explosion close to your town and the power plant evaporated with all the personnel inside.

I am not talking about war. An accident can happen. Not long ago, a Russian satellite, with an atomic plant in its guts, landed in northern Canada. Fortunately, the plant did not explode.

On a minor scale, electric power can be knocked out by a tornado, hurricane, earthquake—take your pick of many possibilities. The chance of an emergency is real, and you could be in the middle of it.

Emergency Power

After you find out that you can't establish communications without commercial power, it is time to find another remedy. A small portable electric generator could be the answer. Storage batteries are a cheaper solution and may be more reliable and safe. With a good 12 V dc power supply, you can operate the 2 meter rig to get in contact with local ham radio operators and get organized. With the same battery supply, you can go



airborne in the HF bands, if you are fortunate enough to own a solid-state rig. Long-distance communications are a must in an emergency.

There are a few all-solid-state little rigs for HF on the market, covering ten to eighty meters. Some, like the new Atlas 350-XL, go all the way to 160 meters, with listening capabilities in the WWV frequencies. Ten-Tec also makes a nice all-solid-state little rig, and jumping on the bandwagon are Drake, DenTron, and Alda. The Alda 103 is a three-band rig with battleship construction, capable of taking a lot of punishment.

Of all the rigs, I like Atlas best. Do not make the mistake of believing that the new 350-XL is a deluxe version of the popular 220-X. The 350-XL is a completely different transceiver, with many sophisticated improvements.

But let's stop talking about transceivers and get back to our hypothetical emergency situation with your lack of power.

A gas power plant costs money, and not everybody is ready to invest a lot of dough on something that will be standing by doing nothing but smell. I believe that one or two storage batteries, with 50 or more Ampere-hours, can provide power for a single sideband operation on two meters for the critical early hours after a disaster strikes.

Because storage batteries emit corrosive fumes, it is not wise to keep them indoors. Put them in a wooden box, vented on the sides, sitting on a stand, in the backyard, protected with plastic tiles. Perhaps you could use solar cells to keep them charged. I'll leave that part up to your imagination.

Mobile Equipment

Having mobile transceivers in the car for the HF

and VHF bands is an ideal backup for the base station. Actually, the first news relayed to the world of the earthquake that leveled the city of Managua, Nicaragua, was sent by a ham radio operator from his mobile rig. (Enrique Gabuardi YN1EGL). After he and his family escaped from their crumbling home, he went airborne on 20 meters and contacted Adrian Espinosa YN1AEO/W4 in Miami. With tremors of fear in his voice, he told him of the disaster they were witnessing. Espinosa called Rafael Estevez WA4ZZG on the land line. Estevez was the president of SIRA (International Society of Ham Radio Operators).

Gabuardi's faint signal from Managua, from a mobile station, sparked the chain reaction that was translated into a gigantic rescue movement staged by the US Government, the Red Cross, and local and national ham radio organizations. Together with doctors, medicines, food, and clothes, two meter rigs



A wounded man is helped by a friend. Thousands lost families, homes, and were injured.

and a group of volunteer Miami radio operators were flown to Managua to help the Nicaraguan hams in the establishment of emergency traffic.

An emergency situation could mean that you, yourself, are forced to leave your home and be relocated in a safe area. In a case like that, you should report



A little girl looks over the rubble which was her home. She does not know where her family may be.



This woman faces a grim future, with her home destroyed and her husband dead.

to the authorities that you are a licensed ham radio operator and can assist with communications. This

could facilitate your transportation with your equipment and power source. This is one reason

why I emphasize the importance of small solid-state rigs. (Another is that in flood conditions electrical equipment is dangerous, and low-voltage rigs like all-solid-state are safer.)

Disaster Training

Field Days are traditional among amateur radio operators. Every year, clubs and radio organizations all over the country get airborne and compete. But is this the real kind of training we need?

During the last ten years, I have been covering, as a newspaperman, revolutions and major disasters in the Caribbean and Central America. In my trips, I made contact with the local radio amateurs. These experiences taught me that while Field Day operations are a lot of fun, they are not remotely close to conditions one finds in a real situation. Technical skill to establish communications is not enough

if you are not adequately prepared.

Preparedness and coordination within local ham clubs and Civil Defense organizations are very important. If you belong to a club which sponsors a repeater, be sure that the technicians in charge have that repeater backed up by storage batteries in case of power failure.

Hurricane and tornado warning notes are important. A well-organized system can save many lives. Mobile operation is a must and if you can work all the bands from your car, that will put you in a favorable position to help your fellow citizens. Another point: Don't risk your own life unnecessarily! You are more useful alive and in one piece.

Be Ready Yourself

Finally, provide for your own basic needs. Water contamination and food shortages must be anticipated. Water purifying tablets like Halazone should be on hand. Non-perishable foods, cereal, canned beef, milk, and sugar should be stored at all times for yourself and your family.

First aid articles like cotton, bandages, aspirin, iodine, alcohol, and other standard items should be stored in a box for easy access and transportation. Good first aid kits can be purchased at any drug store.

Take your immunization shots regularly and keep your certificate on hand. This will give you clearance with the authorities to move around with freedom. It is a good idea to take courses in first aid and rescue operations with the local Red Cross. Try to stay in good physical shape. Remember that a good pair of legs can save your life when everything collapses around you.

Good luck, and 73! ■



The dead can't wait to be buried. In San Pedro, Guatemala, where thousands were killed, there wasn't a single home spared from destruction.