

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this two-part series, *MTA Report* describes how the MTA's Robin Blair and other members of a relief group brought aid to the people of El Salvador, following the January, 2001, earthquake, and to the people of Nicaragua in 1999 following Hurricane Mitch.



A child in El Salvador stands amidst the rubble of his home left devastated by an earthquake.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBIN BLAIR

MTA's Robin Blair Helps Bring Aid to Devastated Areas of El Salvador, Nicaragua

• Part 1 of 2

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Feb. 26) Early last month, a devastating earthquake rocked El Salvador. Thousands of people were without food or shelter. Homes and businesses were destroyed. Relief organizations worldwide mobilized support for the devastated country.



Robin Blair

One of those who responded to the overwhelming need was Robin Blair, 46, an MTA transportation planning manager.

Blair has been volunteering in poverty-stricken areas off and on over the past 30 years. He has a background in economics and has studied the environmental consequences of economic policy in the third world.

He participated in recovery efforts following Hurricane Mitch's devastation of Nicaragua in 1998. Blair has built houses in Mexico and has worked with a group that built a school in Ghana, Africa. He works through two church-related organizations, Iglesia de Cristo and Mission para Cristo.

Blair originally had been scheduled to travel to Nicaragua to participate in relief efforts when the earthquake struck El Salvador. It was to be his fourth humanitarian trip to Central America in two years.

Arriving in Nicaragua, Jan. 18, he and several friends commandeered a truck and loaded it with supplies. They set out the next day for El Salvador. What normally would have been a six-hour drive became a 10-hour ordeal as they were forced repeatedly to detour into the mountains to avoid bridges destroyed by the earthquake.

Blair and his support group were assigned to assess the extent of damage and the medical, housing and nutrition needs of people in the small town of Santa Elena near the capital city, San Salvador.

'You guys are in bad shape'

They also distributed the food and supplies they had loaded in Nicaragua. "The worst thing you can do is to jump out of your truck, look around and say, 'Yeah, you guys are in bad shape,' then get back in your truck and drive off," he says.

Among the most important items the group distributed were drugs for the respiratory illnesses that strike people who live in the open air when their homes are destroyed.

Blair was relieved that he had not arrived empty handed. "We brought several hundred pounds of respiratory drugs, freeze-dried foods, 20 gallons of water in five-gallon jugs and about 500 pounds of pasta."

How do you make sense of things in such chaotic situations?

"If you don't know anyone there," he explains, "it's fairly easy to put the whole situation in numbers – this many people died, this many structures fell. But, once you become involved in people's lives, the personal price you pay is huge."

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Since his return from El Salvador in January, Blair has been working to fill another 40-foot shipping container with building materials, tools and other supplies. Shipment is scheduled in March. Employees who would like to contribute canned or packaged foods, clothing, tools, building supplies and other goods for El Salvador relief may contact Robin Blair at 922-3074.

[GO TO>PART 2:](#) In 1999, Blair made three trips to Nicaragua to assist in relief efforts following Hurricane Mitch.

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