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AFTER THE STORM; In a Migrant Labor Camp, Relief Is Slow and Chaotic

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For a week, the migrant workers and field hands in the spartan Everglades Labor Camp four miles west of this farming center found themselves at the end of the relief lines, ignored and isolated as they battled hunger, thirst and then the weekend's rains. Time and again, an ambulance or police car would stop, residents said today, scan quickly for life-threatening emergencies, then drive on again to tend to other problems, leaving the impoverished community to fend for itself. By Sunday, the several hundred workers and their children who remained in the devastated camp had turned to cooking rancid food atop a makeshift barbecue. It was a costly mistake that left the camp with nine cases of food poisoning to add to a long catalogue of other ills.

The winds of Hurricane Andrew demolished much of the camp, where 4,000 farm workers once made their homes in trailers. By today only about 200 were left. Many residents were unaccounted for. Some were feared dead. Scores had walked away from the devastation, hitching rides out of town to work in the fields of Texas, Georgia or elsewhere. Others were believed to be hiding in the area, confused and afraid that, lacking proper working papers, they would be picked up by immigration officials and deported or jailed.

Near-Total Isolation

Several residents said immigration officials had appeared at the camp early last week saying they wanted to distribute food and water. "We did not believe them," said Maria Leon, a 40-year-old immigrant from Mexico who has lived in the camp for eight years and works at a local plant nursery. "Many were frightened and they ran away. Most of them still do not have their papers." Air Force and police officials who began coordinating relief efforts at the camp today denied that migrant workers, many of whom are illegal aliens, would be dealt with differently than other survivors of the disaster. Yet, their near-total isolation in the week after the hurricane seemed to tell a different story.

"There would be a Navy ambulance come here for 20 minutes and then just leave," said Patrick Ewers, a captain with the Apollo Beach Rescue Squad, a Broward County unit that has been volunteering its services in areas most heavily damaged by the hurricane. "It was incredible. This is a disaster. "People keep sending clothes," he added. "We don't need clothes. We need communications, we need food and we need generators."

Help From Air Rescue Unit

Some help arrived late Sunday when a unit with the 41st Air Rescue Service from Patrick Air Force Base in Cocoa Beach, Fla., came to establish a round-the-clock presence at the camp. "When we got here it was pretty rough," said Tech. Sgt. Daniel Lee Inch, 35, the commander at the site. "There were a lot of people who thought they were in charge. But no one was really in charge. People came and went. Because it's so remote, because it's known as rough, blah, blah, nobody wanted to come in here and set up a 24-hour medical service. Instead, they just passed through."

For those who stayed in the camp last week, the worst privations came as they waited for some kind of organized relief efforts. Sanitary conditions deteriorated in the heat and rain, said Jose Luis Elias, a doctor with the East Coast Migrant Health Project, a federally financed group established to help migrant workers. Water supplies fell short and there were 10 cases of dehydration, countless skin rashes and at least one occurrence of impetigo, a skin disease that can result from infected insect bites. "There was no organization," said Dr. Elias, who arrived at the camp late Sunday. "There was no coordination and no clear plan."

Spoiled and Sodden Supplies

Poorly devised relief efforts in some cases actually made life in the camp harder than it might have been, residents and military officials said. Piles of food and clothing were brought to the camp's concrete schoolhouse and dumped on the ground. With no one at the camp in charge of distributing the supplies, much of the food spoiled or was ruined in the rain, and the clothes became sodden and soiled. By Sunday night, almost 2,000 square feet of supplies lay in a block-long pile outside the schoolhouse. Unusable and in the way, the pile was finally burned.

Describing the site as "total chaos," Mr. Ewers of the Apollo Beach Rescue Squad unit said the supplies had become a health hazard. "I keep hearing about 7,000 troops," he added. "But I only see 10, and this has to be one of the worst-hit areas. I think it's disgraceful." Relief officials at the camp complained bitterly of the lack of organization of the relief efforts, and said isolated areas like the Everglades Labor Camp were almost totally ignored. "All the chiefs just want to be chiefs," said one Air Force officer. "But nobody wants to get down and actually do the dirty work."

'Here We Are Nothing'

Domingo Torres, a 29-year-old field hand who has lived in the camp since it opened in 1973, said he was stunned by the isolation that followed the storm. "There was no response," he said bluntly. "When it's like Russia or something, then Bush is there right away. But here we are nothing. We just sat here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Nothing. "I bet George Bush eats some of the tomatoes we pick," he continued. "But where was he? A lot of people left because they can't handle this. I can't handle this. But I don't have a car, so I can't leave."

By late this afternoon a sense of order seemed to be falling into place. Trash and debris was gathered up and burned, and the schoolhouse was a frenzy of unpacking, stacking and cleaning up. On a propane stove in the dark and stifling kitchen, two women from the camp were making hamburgers from food that had not yet gone bad. A makeshift clinic was also being set up. As residents of the camp started to sift through the debris of what had been their dwellings, they suffered all manner of injuries. "What we need now are shoes," said Barbara Pentoney, a volunteer with the Apollo Beach Rescue Squad. "We especially need children's shoes because they are running around with nothing on their feet, and they are getting cut and we are worrying about tetanus. Which reminds me -- we need tetanus vaccine, too."