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Cuba: Effective disaster response avoids major loss of life from Hurricane Paloma

Louis Michel, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, has praised Cuba's response to Hurricane Paloma which struck the island as a category four storm at the weekend. There had been concern that this hurricane, at the very end of the hurricane season, would seriously damage recovery efforts following the devastating Hurricanes Gustav and Ike this summer. Cuban authorities evacuated more than one million people before Hurricane Paloma struck the island.

Commissioner Michel said: "The 2008 hurricane season is one of the worst Cuba has faced for many years. But the country has a highly effective disaster response system and thanks to this, many lives have certainly been saved." He continued: "Good early warning, evacuation procedures and shelter networks make a huge difference, but when such powerful storms hit, damage to infrastructure, homes and crops is inevitable. The Commission is ready to provide further emergency support if needed, to help tackle any suffering resulting from Hurricane Paloma, in solidarity with the people of Cuba, who have been hit severely by three hurricanes in three months".

The Commission, through its Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO), is currently funding five relief projects in Cuba from a €2 million allocation that was provided following Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, which hit Cuba in August and September 2008. Activities are implemented by international aid organizations who have proven experience of working in the country. Commissioner Michel has also tasked a technical mission to visit Cuba next week. Their agenda will include an analysis of existing needs and the identification of possible further Commission support.

Disaster preparedness is just one of the areas being considered for joint-action between Cuba and the European Commission since the relaunch of co-operation between the two sides in October. The European Commission believes Cuba's expertise in disaster response could also be of huge benefit to the Caribbean region as a whole.