El Salvador is at the southernmost end of the massive mountain ranges that extend from Alaska, through the United States (the Rocky Mountains) and into Mexico and Central America. These mountains have given El Salvador a reputation for striking natural beauty, but there is a dark side to this blessing, and El Salvador, called the “Land of Volcanoes,” is subject to much dangerous seismic activity. Tragically, on January 13, 2001, this threat manifested itself when an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale struck El Salvador. The quake and its aftershocks resulted in the loss of more than 1,100 lives, caused US$1 billion in damage, destroyed nearly 140,000 homes and left thousands of people homeless.

Soon after the quake, the government of El Salvador, through the Embassy of the Republic of China, requested assistance from the ICDF. The ICDF dispatched Specialist Ho Shiu-lai, a construction expert attached to the ICDF Technical Mission in Costa Rica, to the disaster zone. Ho spent three weeks in El Salvador, conducting an emergency study of conditions, designing new bamboo housing for the stricken citizens, and teaching the people how to construct the new housing.

Ho designed a functional, 6x7 meter, three-room bamboo house, which can accommodate a family of 5-6. Ho used as principal construction materials common, inexpensive Asper and Guadua bamboo, which had been developed in El Salvador in previous ICDF soil-conservation and handicrafts projects. Bamboo housing has two key advantages in emergency situations such as this one. First, it is much cheaper than most typical housing. Total construction costs are only about US$1,300 per house, which includes bamboo, doors, windows, utility and lavatory equipment, additional materials and labor. Second, bamboo housing is much easier and faster to build than houses constructed with other building materials, such as brick. With a short 50-man-day construction period, this housing can quickly be supplied to people in urgent need (a work team of five can build a house in 10 days). The housing is considered temporary (bathroom and...
kitchen facilities are outdoors), but it is in fact sturdy enough to be used for up to 10 years.

San Martin, a village near the hard-hit capital of San Salvador, was selected as a location for the construction of a demonstration housing unit. Meanwhile, the ICDF readied US$200,000 for grants to approved homeowners, to be distributed through the ROC Embassy in El Salvador. The government of El Salvador covered additional costs for land and construction of public facilities and public utilities.

On May 7, 2001, ROC Ambassador to El Salvador, Bing F. Yen, San Martin mayor, Valentin Castro Sanchez, and other El Salvadoran officials attended a ceremony marking the completion of Specialist Ho’s demonstration housing unit. With this accomplishment, additional training, and the provision of 500 Spanish-language instruction manuals by the ICDF Technical Mission in El Salvador, the government, business sector and people of El Salvador took up the reins of the project. Working with the ICDF, they are currently completing the construction of 150 housing units, which are being built in urban areas adjacent to San Salvador.

The El Salvador Bamboo Housing Project is providing critical emergency housing to the people who suffered from the January quake in El Salvador—but it is also doing much more. In accord with ICDF strategy, the project is not intended to be a handout, but a true helping hand. Working cooperatively with El Salvador organizations and citizens, the project is imparting a range of construction and community development skills, better preparing the people for future emergencies when they strike, and also providing them with the facilities to improve their everyday lives and communities. This approach has worked successfully before, in Housing Solidarity Reconstruction Programs in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras, and the Guatemala Rio Polochic Region Recovery Program (all four countries were heavily damaged by Hurricane Mitch in 1998). The ICDF is happy to be assisting El Salvador in these productive ways, and believes that the nation’s citizens will build great things with the tools they are being provided.