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Simultaneous Twin Disasters Rock El Salvador

by LADB Staff

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Attacks from above and below have sent El Salvador careening off course as the country looked forward to benefiting from a favorable outlook in coffee, sugar, and other commodity prices. Iamatepec volcano, also called Santa Ana, erupted for the first time in 100 years, puking hot rock, boiling mud and water, toxic smoke, and ash 16 km into the sky and down its slopes to engulf the countryside. Thousands of people fled, some died, leaving villages and flimsy houses abandoned. All this under torrential rains spun off by hurricane Stan that have drenched the country for days and contributed to a mudslide that caused deaths and impeded rescue attempts.

Iamatepec, at 2,381 meters, is the highest point in El Salvador. It last erupted in 1904. It had been rumbling since mid-August, but quieted just before erupting, taking the country by surprise. More than 20,000 people live in its immediate environs, 2,250 of whom were immediately evacuated as it began to expel magma toward the town of San Blas and shoot blazing red rocks ranging from the size of a football to the size of a car skyward. Boiling mud avalanched from a crater lake into the hamlet of Palo Campana, 2 km from the crater, killing two and causing the 200 residents to take to their heels. The volcano is part of Los Volcanes National Park, an area under the protection of the Environmental Ministry. It contains rare flora and fauna, much of which has burned.

Ecologists look benignly upon the evolving environmental scene, more concerned with the threat to people. Park manager Juan Pablo Dominquez said that, while damage from acids and other falling contaminants is severe, "it is a natural response to the presence of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere; there really has been strong damage to the flora and fauna of the zone." He added, however, that the damage is not alarming and is part of nature's normal cycles. After an evaluation of the damage, there will be an opportunity to study the recovery of the area, he said.

Stan was a Category 1 hurricane that hit southern Mexico, triggering separate storms to the south, which Salvadoran officials now say have claimed at least 49 lives in the country, most from mudslides. The storm and the volcano forced the evacuation of more than 16,700 Salvadorans, a number that may have doubled in the succeeding days. The people are lodged in 167 shelters throughout the country.

"There isn't a corner of the country where there isn't pain and destruction to be found," said Edwin Rivera, spokesman for rescue efforts. The damage is not limited to El Salvador. Nicaragua, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Mexico have all suffered loss of life and property, but El Salvador, coping with two separate events, is the worst hit in Central America.

Government responds rapidly President Antonio Saca immediately began a round of visits to shelters, telling reporters he wanted to supervise the operations first hand. "We're going to do complete supervision in the shelters, of the food, safety, of everything that we are delivering to

affected Salvadorans." He spoke on Oct. 4, as rescue activities were still taking place. Saca said flooding was expected to continue for 48 more hours.

Some shelters had still not gotten their full measure of aid because conditions did not allow forces of the *Comite de Emergencia Nacional* (COEN) to reach them. The recovery effort also awaits action in the *Asamblea Nacional* (AN) to ratify Saca's emergency declaration. The legislation was expected shortly and would allow the state to request international aid, which has reportedly already been offered by several neighboring presidents and various humanitarian organizations. Health officials have also taken action.

Health Minister Guillermo Maza said there was a danger of outbreaks of respiratory, infectious, dermatological, and intestinal diseases, and the ministry has moved to see that measures are taken in the shelters to avoid these. He said at least half the health problems treated in the shelters have been related to respiratory trauma. His next major worry is an outbreak of dengue, the prevention of which depends on proper maintenance of water supplies and pooling waters where the vector, *aedes aegypti*, breeds. He said authorities are taking control of these matters, particularly in areas affected by the volcano. Dermatological problems have also been seen in abundance where the effects of sulfur, gasses, and ash have taken their toll.

Economy deteriorating

The economic toll promises to be no less serious than the personal. It will be some time before a full accounting can be taken, but already, even before the twin disasters have finished their assault and battery, hints of the eventual cost to agriculture and industry are trickling in. Experts at the *Fundacion Salvadorena para las Investigaciones del Cafe* (Procafe) say that in the area of the volcano it is expected that many plantations will die from the sulfur and ash, and growers have said the plantation landscape had changed radically overnight from the wind and rain. Locals have never seen this combination of forces before.

In the past, prevailing winds drove volcanic emanations away from cultivated regions. Alirio Hernandez, agronomist at one of the hardest-hit fincas, San Blas, said the searing substances had ruined even the most hardy and resistant of plant life on the finca. He said it looked as if a crop duster had sprayed the landscape with poison. Unlike the ecologists eager to study nature's recuperative powers, agriculturalists are concerned that the region's production will be affected long term, not least by a thick cover of ash blanketing everything in sight.

Production of corn, beans, and other food crops will suffer along with coffee. Cotton has also been lost. The earliest estimates are that 3% of the crops sown nationwide are already destroyed. A bright spot for cotton producers is that it is the only crop covered by disaster insurance. Experts warned that losses to this crop would grow substantially.

Agriculture Minister Mario Salaverria said it is still too early to assess damage. The country was expecting record production of basic grains in the coming year, and 60% of the bean crop and 20%

of the corn has already been planted. The various agricultural associations do not know the extent of their damages either. Representatives of the Asociacion Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP) have expressed pessimism regarding likely growth figures for 2005.

In the livestock sector, poultry production has been hurt and egg production will decline as more than 120,000 birds just ready to produce were lost at just one single farm. Producers have explained that it will take about five months to raise new chickens to replace them. Many smaller producers are similarly affected. Cattle and dairy infrastructure is still questionable. Cows in many locales are alive for now, but the rains continue, and producers anticipate losses not only from drowning but also from loss of pasture lands and feed stocks.

Damage to homes and their surroundings has been severe locally, but less so to the national infrastructure. The Superintendencia General de Electricidad y Telecomunicaciones (SIGET) has reported little damage to telephone networks, and regional electricity distributors have said that many lines are down but substations have not suffered. Power was out, however, in La Libertad, Santiago Texacuangos, Rosario La Paz, Zacatecoluca, and Planes de Renderos. Gasoline supplies are adequate for the emergency period, but there is concern that deliveries might be disrupted by highway damage.

Meanwhile, as of Oct 5, the devastating rains continued to fall, and SNET geology director Carlos Pullinger said that the threat from Ilamatepec was not over. He expected another blow. "There has been a cluster of shocks followed by low amplitude, which makes one think there might be more activity of small or moderate amplitude," he said, adding there is a lower probability of a major eruption.

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