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## **An Experienced Government Is Tested Again In Storm-ravaged Guatemala**

*by LADB Staff*

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Panabaj has ceased to exist. The small town hard by its better-known neighbor, Santiago de Atitlan, in Guatemala has been buried in mud, entombing hundreds of its inhabitants. It is not the only community that heavy rains spun off Hurricane Stan have expunged. Surviving officials in these places have asked that the towns be declared mass graves. More than 650 people have been confirmed dead in mudslides and floods occasioned by the relentless downpour. Many more confirmations will be made in succeeding days.

Said Diego Esquina, mayor of Panabaj, "We are asking that Panabaj be declared a cemetery. We are tired. We no longer know where to dig." What bodies have been recovered, about 77 of them, "are so rotten that they can no longer be identified," said the mayor, "They will only bring disease." The story is very much the same in neighboring Tzanchaj, where the volunteer firefighters (bomberos), the people who do most of the rescue and disaster work in Guatemala, have determined that further work would be fruitless. "Most of the people are where the mud is thickest, and we haven't been able to work there because of the danger," said one of the firefighters, Max Chiquito. In these towns and others, entire families have disappeared.

Guatemala has a disaster-response agency, the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reduccion de Desastres (CONRED), but their emergency-operations committees (Comites de Operaciones de Emergencia) are not well-distributed, and it is left to the bomberos to organize the work. Hurried burials to avoid disease and redesignating towns as cemeteries have caused some consternation among members of traditional communities, where custom or religion require individual ceremonies for the dead. In these communities, it is held that each person must have a sometimes-daylong mourning ritual attended by family, neighbors, and friends.

Said Virgilio Perez, a campesino who could not offer this rite for his one-and-a-half-year-old daughter Gema Candela, "When a person dies, we mourn for them for one day, and then the next day we bury them at exactly the same time of day they died." Gema Candela was buried in a common pit. "I'm afraid to live here anymore," lamented Perez. Nor is this the only local norm to be washed away. Indigenous communities still grieve and resent the years of the 1960-1996 internal war when they were cruelly mistreated by the Guatemalan Army.

A 1990 massacre at the hands of the army at Atitlan is a vivid memory for communities there. Now they refuse to let soldiers on relief and rescue missions into their towns and enclaves, as they have since the war ended and the Peace Accords gave them that right (see NotiCen, 1998-03-15, 2002-02-07). Most of the victims of the mudslides are Sutujil, of whom only about 100,000 still exist, all in the Atitlan area. Religious leaders did what they could.

Near the Panabaj mudslide, Francisco Coquiz Xicay burned copal and lit candles before statues of three Catholic saints who locally represent the spirits that hold the mountains together. "They hold the volcanoes in check with three strings," he told a reporter, "but because people have abandoned them and ignored them, they let go of the strings, they let loose the mountains." President Oscar Berger seemed able to do little else at first than to declare a three-day mourning period. He said, as he appeared on TV with his wife Wendy, both dressed in black, that he would personally take charge of the situation. "I have placed myself at the head of the program of disaster relief to bring humanitarian aid and damage assessment and reconstruction planning." But he is up against continuing deluge, blocked and broken roads, hijacking of vehicles carrying food and supplies, hoarding and price gouging.

More than a week after the rain began without respite, an estimated 134,000 people were affected, with nearly 95,000 in shelters, more than 6,000 homes damaged or destroyed, and the numbers in each of these categories kept growing. But Berger's governing party, the Gran Alianza Nacional (GAN), is a split-off from the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), known for its technocratic approach to problems. He quickly ordered all departments of his government to reorder its budget for the remainder of the fiscal year and to orient the 2006 budget toward, as he said, "social infrastructure, water, education, schools, health, and reactivating productive programs and guaranteeing food security." He ordered each of the states' ministries to prepare an analysis along these lines for the Secretaria General de Planificacion to use in a comprehensive reconstruction plan.

Director of the Presidency Roberto Gonzalez Diaz-Duran said, "The president's instruction is that every institution start to prepare itself to make a financial restructuring for the rest of the year and the coming year." Finance Minister Maria Antonieta de Bonilla said that for this year changes would be made to deal with the emergency. "We will analyze options for reprogramming resources, such as the redesignation of loans and trusts." Luis Flores, president of one of these trusts, the Fondo de Inversion Social (FIS), said that, because the storm ruined much of the nation's crops, "The priority is to guarantee food for all these people during the next six months." Flores was vice president during the presidency of Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000).

Arzu's PAN government dealt effectively with reconstruction after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (see NotiCen, 1998-11-12), putting in place a plan to deal with economic recovery as well. Berger was mayor of Guatemala City during that time. Now, Arzu is mayor of the capital. The people at the top of this government are very experienced in the business of recovery from natural disasters.

Estimating the toll Preliminary government figures indicate it will be necessary to relocate and/or provide housing materials and sustenance for 10,000 families in the days to come. Authorities have said that number could reach 200,000. It has also been estimated that damage to the roads and highway system is around 78%, with 20 bridges knocked out. The government is waiting for equipment from the US Army that will allow imaging the affected areas and pinpointing roads in need of repair. The government will utilize the technology to carry out the repair effort.

The electrical grid also sustained major damage, with many kilometers of cable down, transformers destroyed, and at least one substation in danger of plummeting. Flores estimated costs of repair in the neighborhood of US\$16 million, necessitating diversion of funds from other FIS projects to reconstruct the grid. He said megaprojects would be postponed as would large infrastructure projects. CONRED has estimated that 30,000 sq km under cultivation have been damaged.

Departments affected include Escuintla, Santa Rosa, Retalhuleu, Suchitepequez, Quetzaltenango, Chimaltenango, and San Marcos. Very preliminary estimates put the dollar cost at about US\$1 billion.

Losses to the sugar crop are estimated at around US\$33 million. Of a total 185,000 hectares planted, about 75,000 ha are thought lost. In some areas the cane is drowned under a meter of water. The industry employs about 300,000 workers. In addition to money losses, a significant supply of agricultural products destined for the capital has also been curtailed. What produce has not been destroyed in the fields has rotted for lack of transportation to market. In the manufacturing sector, three large textile factories that supply the maquila industry are under water. Maquila managers have already begun to move their operations out of the country, as have fabric factories. Costs associated with the moves are large and could be large enough to ensure that these facilities, along with the jobs they generated, are lost permanently.

This industry is under immense pressure to fulfill its US contracts, hence their quick flight. They are foreign owned and have no allegiance to Guatemala. Econgelligence a factor As the government, with its sound background in restoration, plans for remaking the country, some in the international community are concerned along with Coquiz Xicay about the spirits who held the mountains together and about the neglect that led them to let go of the strings. Using a different metaphor, environmentalists say the damage in Guatemala and the region was foreseeable and much of it was preventable.

Julio Calderon, head of natural resources at the UN Environment Program (UNEP) regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean, told the media, "We can state that we will find that the hardest hit zones were also the ones that had suffered the worst deforestation and degradation" prior to the storm. He said countries in the region have been repeatedly warned that the destruction wrought by storms of this kind is heightened when the environment is already seriously deteriorated. He said that vegetation that might have held the land together and protected it from washing or blowing away had disappeared as a result of urban and agricultural development, roads, and other infrastructure.

According to the UNEP report GEO [Global Environment Outlook] Latin America and the Caribbean, disasters of this kind are predictable to varying degrees and their effects depend on environmental and human vulnerability. Calderon said there is much to be done by way of prevention. For now, though, Guatemala is fixed on the present situation. Vice President Eduardo Stein said current estimates of the number of people hurt physically or materially has topped 3.5 million. Twelve of the departments with the greatest population have suffered major damage, among them San Marcos with 645,000 inhabitants, Quetzaltenango with 503,000, Esquintla with

386,000, and Solola with 222,000. Devastation has struck an area larger than the entire area of El Salvador.

The known death toll has reached beyond 650 people, with many more still unaccounted for. The number could surpass 2,000. Elsewhere in the region, the storm has claimed 71 lives in El Salvador, 17 in Mexico, 10 in Nicaragua, four in Honduras, and two in Costa Rica.

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