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Guatemala: Landslide In Capital Shantytown Exposes Inadequate Planning Policies

by Louisa Reynolds

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Gilberto Ramírez Alveño, 25, spends his days in a wheelchair, watching TV. On May 29, in the midst of Tropical Storm Agatha, his home, on a mountain slope in the Canaán neighborhood, in Guatemala City's Zone 18, was destroyed by an avalanche of rocks and mud that killed 11 people.

Ramírez's wife and his son, who had celebrated his second birthday on April 28, died, and he managed to escape with a twisted ankle and minor injuries. He is now living a few blocks away with one of his sisters, in a 15 meter by 5 meter house with no windows, where seven family members are cramped together.

Ramírez was born in Nueva Concepción, in the eastern department of Escuintla, and moved to Guatemala City to live closer to his sister. Another sister, Teresa, who is 7 months pregnant, also lives in the same house after her 6-year-old son died during the mudslide.

Mirna Orozco lives a few streets downhill in a hut with no electricity or running water, where her 4-year-old son crawls semi-naked on a dirt floor. A neighbor has allowed her to live there temporarily after her house was swept away.

Canaán is made up of 800 dwellings where around 1,200 people live. The neighborhood was founded in 1993 by poor people who emigrated from rural areas or other shantytowns in Guatemala City suburbs. It is at the top of a hill beyond the overcrowded Maya neighborhood, and settlers have gradually spilled into the surrounding slopes and ravines.

All the fatalities reported in Guatemala City during Tropical Storm Agatha occurred in Canaán. In other parts of the city, around 2,000 people were left homeless.

"I was the first person to arrive here back in 1993," says Arelis López, with pride. López says real estate corporation Viviendas Hoy sold them their plots of land with mortgages provided by local bank Vivibanco for prices between 30,000 quetzales (US$2,500) and 50,000 quetzales (US$6,240).

In dangerous areas prone to landslides, land prices are considerably cheaper, tempting poor families to buy there. Most settlers built their homes with their own hands with cement blocks and aluminum sheets.

These settlers dreamed of owning their own home, no matter how basic it might be. "We used to live in the Castañas neighborhood, Zone 11, but it was difficult to pay rent every month," says América Miranda.

Viviendas Hoy promised them a school, a children's park, a market, and a church, which never materialized. Since the mudslide, survivors have asked Viviendas Hoy to rehouse them on new plots in safer parts of the neighborhood, but such pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

Eleven people are still living in a high-risk area of Canaán but refuse to leave as they fear losing the homes they built with so much effort.
Few options for urban poor

Town-planning experts say inadequate housing policies have failed to stop shantytowns such as Canaán from springing up in areas prone to landslides and other natural disasters, and the government deserves a fair share of the blame for granting title deeds to illegal settlers without carrying out a prior risk assessment.

Víctor Duarte, director of Unidad para el Desarrollo de la Vivienda Popular (Udevipo) of the Ministerio de Comunicaciones, Infraestructura y Vivienda (CIV), says 15,000 title deeds have been granted throughout the country since 2008. Duarte claims that deeds are only granted for plots classified as habitable by the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reducción de Desastres (CONRED).

However, researcher Amanda Morán of the Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales (CEUR) of the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC), claims that this is far from true as "plots are legalized without taking the risk factor into account or implementing an integral development policy in these neighborhoods" that includes pavements and the provision of basic services such as drains, water, and electricity.

In 2007, there were 255 shantytowns (asentamientos) in Guatemala City, a figure that had swelled to 279 by 2009. Most shantytowns were set up by poor people from rural areas after the 1976 earthquake or by those displaced by the armed conflict.

Morán says it is ironic that, under the administration of Guatemalan President Álvaro Colom, which is more left-leaning than the previous government of President Óscar Berger (2004-2008), the housing issue has received little or no attention, after the Mejorando Mi Barrio (improving my neighborhood) program run by the Fondo Guatemalteco de Vivienda (FOGUAVI), which gave housing subsidies to the working class, ground to a halt in 2008.

"There was a lot of corruption, the comptroller general intervened and FOGUAVI faced huge debts," Morán said.

Enrique Godoy, former vice mayor of Guatemala City, said the problem is that "these populations have been granted deeds for the areas where they have settled rather than being rehoused in better areas."

Godoy points out that victims of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 were rehoused in 10 suburbs, 30 km from Guatemala City, where people had no access to employment. As a result, many returned to their former dwellings, regardless of the risk. Godoy says a sound town-planning policy should seek to regenerate inner-city areas that are currently underdeveloped.

Despite a Municipal Code that states that every municipality in the country must have a Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial (POT) that ensures the orderly development of both urban and rural populations, only Guatemala City has one, as successive governments have paid scant attention to housing issues.

In 2008, USAC drafted a housing bill (Ley de Vivienda) that proposed an integral solution to the problem, including creating a Ministerio de Vivienda, greater independence and better funding for FOGUAVI's housing programs, and stricter town-planning regulations. However, the bill remains stuck in Congress and has yet to be approved by the Comisión de Vivienda.