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## **Guatemala: Hurricane Agatha Exposes Need For Greater Disaster-prevention Investment**

*by Louisa Reynolds*

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Nine-year-old Rutilia screams and points to the place where five houses in the village of Parajbei, Santa Apolonia, in the department of Chimaltenango, were buried under a mudslide. The concrete floor where the tiny girl now stands emerges like a platform amid a sea of mud and debris. For two days, the villagers waded through the mud searching for those who were missing, including Rutilia's grandmother Juliana.

On May 31, two days after Guatemala was hit by Tropical Storm Agatha, the death toll in the Santa Apolonia municipality had reached 14. This was mostly as a result of two huge mudslides in Santa Apolonia, the smallest municipality in Chimaltenango, with 17,000 inhabitants.

Mayor Marco Tulio Núñez used municipal resources to clear the access routes to Santa Apolonia and allow humanitarian aid to reach the victims as experts from the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reducción de Desastres (CONRED) had yet to arrive at the scene three days after the disaster.

All Núñez received in response to his pleas for help was a text message from Chimaltenango Gov. Erick de León that read, "I'm sorry brother. I can't spare anyone to help you search for bodies."

A few minutes later, a group of villagers told Núñez that the bodies of two children had been found – Salomón Suy, 8, and his brother Elizardo, 4. The two boys were lying on a bed with the eldest child's body shielding Elizardo's from the torrent of rocks and mud that fell onto their house.

As bodies were gradually retrieved, white coffins were lined up on the village's main street in the midday sun waiting to be buried in the afternoon. Only one member of the Suy family, who was away from home when the tragedy occurred, survived.

In the villages of Santa Apolonia, the community was quick to organize and respond to the emergency with its own limited resources, and people handed out rice, beans, chuchitos (a type of tamale wrapped in a dried corn husk and served with tomato sauce), and coffee.

De León said the worst affected municipalities were prioritized in the following order when it came to distributing the aid that finally arrived from the central government a week later: Tecpán, Santa Apolonia, San José Poaquil, Comalapa, and Acatenango.

A total of 2,450 families in Chimaltenango were left homeless and 54 communities were cut off from the rest of the country after access roads and bridges collapsed during the storm. With a death toll of 50 people, it was the department with the highest number of victims.

CONRED said that, on a national level, Agatha left 166 dead, 98 disappeared, 88 injured, and 89,712 people homeless. With 11 deaths in El Salvador and 18 in Honduras, the regional death toll rose to 195 victims (see NotiCen, [June 10, 2010](#)).

### *Lessons learned*

In the wake of previous disasters such as Hurricane Stan, which left 1,620 people dead in Central America, CONRED has aimed to build a nationwide network whereby community leaders, mayors, and governors liaise with each other and pool resources to evacuate populations at risk and provide immediate relief to the injured and homeless (see NotiCen, [October 10, 2005](#) and [October 13, 2005](#)).

However, Núñez complains that De León never called a meeting with the mayors to draw up a list of priorities or an emergency plan when the storm broke out.

Experts in disaster management said that, although CONRED's coordination efforts at a municipal level have improved significantly in the past five years, it is clear that more resources need to be invested to minimize the impact of hurricanes and other national disasters.

Although his municipality was one of the worst affected, with a death toll of 14, José Tiriquiz Tiniguar, mayor of Chichicastenango in the highland department of Quiché, says that "the COCODES [Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo] were well-organized" and efforts were well-coordinated."

"We're OK in terms of community organization but not in terms of financial resources," says José Berrendo, governor of Quiché, where six municipalities were left without communications and 60% of the departmental infrastructure was destroyed.

CONRED's departmental emergency store in Quiché only had 2,000 food rations ready to be used in the event of a disaster, when the department's population exceeds 1 million.

Whereas Tiriquiz says that CONRED offered a swift response despite its limited resources, Silverio Cael Sun, mayor of Purulhá in the department of Baja Verapaz, where 20 villages were left incommunicado, complains that disaster relief was badly organized and more chaotic than when Hurricane Stan hit the country in 2005. "CONRED has been of no use whatsoever. When Stan occurred, they at least came to ask us how they could help," the mayor said.

However, Baja Verapaz Gov. Víctor García claims that "there is a lot of misinformation among the communities," as it is the community leaders and mayors who are responsible for informing the governor of the damage suffered and requesting help.

The efficacy of relief efforts clearly varied from one community to another. But, on the whole, Manolo Barillas, an expert in disaster management with Oxfam Great Britain, said, "I feel relieved by the fact that we are talking about 166 deaths rather than 1,100, as occurred when Hurricane Stan struck Guatemala. I have visited a number of urban communities where local emergency committees carried out preventive evacuations."

"We need to continue educating the communities so that they provide their own security and create a risk-management culture that involves schools, families, and religious groups. It is important to strengthen institutions, not just by assigning more resources to CONRED but by creating a more modern and effective law. We need to reach out to thousands of at-risk communities in every mountain, valley, and ravine," he added.

Two weeks ago, Karin Slowing Umaña, director of the Secretaría de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia (Segeplan), put forward a national recovery plan that includes immediate humanitarian aid for the affected communities, actions to reduce the impact of climate change, and steps that must be taken to strengthen the country's key institutions.

"River basins are the most densely populated areas in the country, which means we are destroying the basin's capacity to prevent and mitigate disasters. Without adequate basin-management policies, this situation will be repeated again and again. This is why the plan put forward by Segeplan gives priority to actions against climate change and territorial planning. People won't see the effects in the short term, but, without this, we will witness more of these episodes and each time we will be in a weaker position to face them," she said.

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