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Mudslides Following Heavy Rains Kill Dozens in Guatemala

by Louisa Reynolds
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On Sept. 4, a huge mudslide on the Inter-American Highway, northwest of Guatemala City, buried a bus leaving 10 people dead and 11 injured.

Roselia Nicolás says that her husband Cristóbal Colón, 46, a farm laborer, took the bus in Pacorral, a tiny village in the municipality of Tecpán, Chimaltenango, where the couple lived with their 12 children, and was on his way to a local bank to pay the last installment of a small loan.

"The neighbors told me about the accident, and I ran to the road to look for him," Nicolás says.
"What will I do now with all these children," she says pointing to the toddlers gathered around their father’s coffin.

All the victims of the accident came from the villages of Pacorral and Panabajal, Tecpán, and soon after word of the accident spread, their relatives rushed to the scene, eager to dig out the victims using spades and other rudimentary farming tools.

Rescue workers were forced to cut the bus in half to retrieve bodies and survivors from the wreckage.

Pedro Colón Nicolás, 24, Colón’s eldest son, says that the company responsible for widening the section of the highway where the tragic accident occurred should be held responsible.

Victoriano Socop, who mourned the death of his 74-year-old father Francisco, agrees. "It was the company’s fault because they left the road half-finished," he said.

Longino Jiatz, mayor of Tecpán, visited the victims’ homes, giving each of the families a coffin and a 200 quetzal (Q200, US$25) compensation per household. "This happened because they were widening the road to add two extra lanes. It could have been avoided if things had been done differently," he said.

However, a spokesperson for Constructora Nacional S.A. (CONASA), the company in charge of widening the area where the mudslide occurred, said that extreme weather conditions during the tropical-rain season meant that CONASA had been forced to "deploy all available resources to avoid mudslides in different areas" but that it was "impossible to foresee every possible incident."

After the first mudslide, President Álvaro Colom ordered the Inter-American Highway to be temporarily closed to prevent further accidents. However, it was too late as, an hour later, a similar accident occurred in Cumbres de Alaska, in the municipality of Nahulá, Sololá, after five vehicles and a bus were swept away by a second mudslide on the Inter-American Highway, killing at least 24 people.

As a crowd frantically tried to dig out the victims, many were buried by a second avalanche of mud and rocks, leading to the suspension of the rescue operation until the storm had abated.
In 24 hours, 189 different incidents occurred mainly in the departments of Suchitepéquez, Retalhuleu, Escuintla, and Sololá, leaving 44 people dead, 56 injured, and 11,495 homeless, according to the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reducción de Desastres (CONRED).

The devastation was comparable to Tropical Storm Agatha, which killed 165 Guatemalans in May this year (NotiCen, June 24, 2010).

The deadliest accidents occurred after hillsides suddenly collapsed following weeks of heavy rain that saturated Guatemala’s mountainous terrain.

**Congress approves emergency funds**

After the tragic weekend that claimed 44 lives, President Colom urged Congress to free up emergency funds to cope with what he called "a national tragedy."

Three days later, all political factions in Congress set aside partisan differences and approved a Q1.3 billion (US$161 million) increase to the national budget, which had been requested by the executive three months earlier to rebuild the country in the wake of Tropical Storm Agatha.

Of this amount, Q780 million (US$96.6 million) will be used to repair roads and bridges, Q80 million (US$9.9 million) will be assigned to the Ministerio de Salud, Q150 million (US$18.6 million) to programs aimed at helping poor farmers who have lost their crops, and Q100 million (US$12.4 million) to potable-water projects.

This put an end to weeks of political wrangling in Congress as the far right Partido Patriota (PP) refused to free up the funds, arguing that the governing Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) party would divert them toward the Consejo de Cohesión Social (CCS).

The CCS includes a number of social programs, such as the conditioned cash transfer program Mi Familia Progresa, led by first lady Sandra Torres (NotiCen, Oct. 22, 2009). Although such programs have yielded positive results in other Latin American countries, the opposition has repeatedly accused the government of using them as a platform for Torres' political ambitions.

With elections looming in 2011, Torres is widely popular in impoverished rural areas and urban shantytowns and is regarded as the UNE party’s most likely candidate. For this reason, the opposition agreed to approve the funds only after a number of clauses were included in the bill to ensure that funds would not be diverted to other programs.

One of these clauses states that all medicines requested as part of the relief efforts must be purchased through the World Health Organization (WHO), the Panamerican Health Organization (PHO), or the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), to prevent overpriced purchases from providers with political ties with the government.

Jack Irving Cohen, the government’s main supplier of medical equipment, has held a monopoly on such products—often overpriced—and has financed successive administrations during the past 40 years.

Following the approval of these funds, Mario Taracena, president of the congressional Comisión de Finanzas, warned that the amount was insufficient as it budgeted the repair works needed in the wake of Agatha three months earlier and did not take into account the new emergency.
He added that the commission is thinking of issuing more treasury bonds totaling US$200 million or, as a last resort, issuing a new tax, which is likely to stir considerable opposition from the business sector, which has historically been vehemently opposed to any attempts to increase taxation, even though Guatemala has the lowest tax rates in Latin America.

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