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Cuba Suffers One of Most Intense Droughts in History

by Daniel Vázquez

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Cuba is suffering through a severe drought caused by climate change and two consecutive years of negligible rainfall, which has killed thousands of cattle and affected drinking-water supplies in several cities, including the two largest on the island, Havana and Santiago de Cuba.

The drought began in November 2008 and intensified in 2009, which was classified as the fourth driest in the past 109 years. Drought is a part of the country's natural climate variations, but in the last 40 years it has occurred with greater frequency and intensity, sources at the Instituto de Meteorología de Cuba (INSMET) indicated.

The past dry season, from November 2010 to April 2011, experienced less precipitation than expected because of the phenomenon La Niña-Southern Oscillation (ENSO), the cooling of the surface waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, which reached its greatest level in December.

Experts fear the expansion and intensification of the drought in the future, especially in the eastern region where 25% of the nation's 11.2 million people reside. However, in recent months the westernmost province, Pinar del Rio, and the nation's capital, Havana, recorded a sharp drop in rainfall and in their water reserves.

Among the most severe years of drought in the island's history were 2004 and 2005, with economic losses of US\$1.2 million and direct damage to 2 million people and 900 municipalities. Now, the damages have worsened in urban areas owing to the age and reduced maintenance of the water systems.

Death in the fields

Scenes from Cuban state television show campesinos carrying water from rivers in wobbly ox-drawn carts and feeding their cattle the remains of the recent sugarcane crop. In the central area of the island, inhabitants have had to deepen existing wells because of the dropping groundwater levels.

From November 2010 to April 2011, 79% of Cuban territory lacked rain, and in 17% of these areas the situation became "extremely severe." The island depends largely on tropical cyclones to fill the nearly 250 dams, but they often bring floods, landslides, and other calamities.

In Camagüey, the country's main livestock center, the lack of pasture, water, and feed for livestock killed 20,000 cattle. This was reported in May when official television broadcast the devastating images of animals dead from starvation baking under the tropical sun and bony cows searching for grass in the parched and dusty plains.

Desertification and land degradation affects 1.58 million hectares of Cuba or 14% of the total land area. This is a result of historical misuse and bad land management. Plans to mitigate the impact of drought and land degradation include planting more resistant crop varieties as well as rehabilitating eroded and salinized areas.

President Raúl Castro's government has declared food production a strategic issue ever since he took office in 2006 following his brother Fidel's sudden health crisis. Cuba spent US\$1.5 million in 2010 to import 80% of its food, worsening the economy of a country whose coffers are in urgent need of money.

The fear of drought forced the government to include training and preparations for forest fires as part of the annual national catastrophe-preparedness exercises held in May before the beginning of the hurricane season. Just in Camagüey Province, 500 km east of Havana, the drought contributed to one-third of the 352 fires during the first four months of this year.

Little water and many leaks

Several Cuban cities experiencing a potable-water-supply crisis are on the eastern side of the island, including Holguín and Las Tunas, both with more than 140,000 inhabitants. Santiago de Cuba, the second city in national importance, is going through a critical situation with drinking-water-supply disruptions in some areas for several days at a time.

Havana, with 2.2 million inhabitants, has a water system between 50 and 100 years old so riddled by leaks that 70% of the water pumped is lost between the source and the consumer, lamented Granma, the official daily.

Seventy percent of the Havana waterworks system or 2,194 km of pipes are in poor condition, but the pace of repairs is slow. In 2010, 82 km were repaired. The damages affect almost half the population, and about 111,000 inhabitants require the permanent use of water-supply trucks.

Even residents of the most exclusive neighborhoods, such as El Vedado, have not escaped the installation of supplemental water tanks to alleviate the shortages. In some areas, water comes every four days, causing a commotion as the neighbors shout warnings to each other or make phone calls advising the storage of as much water as possible in pots and buckets.

This is the worst water-supply crisis in half a century in Havana. The authorities are threatening to cut off service to the wasteful, including a university campus and the most famous convention center, the Palacio de las Convenciones, internationally known as the Castro brothers' usual forum.

More heat and drought in the future

As an archipelago, Cuba is vulnerable to climate change. Prolonged droughts, higher temperatures, and a rising sea are foreseen for the future. "Slowly, silently, the sea robs the land from our island. The signs are everywhere, although there are zones where they are more evident," stated the weekly newspaper .

The island's coastal areas are home to 1.4 million people in 245 settlements, of which 181 are rural and 64 are urban. Predictions are that by 2050, some shorelines will have retreated and changed the morphology of the coastline and river mouths. About 175 km of the southwestern coast are especially vulnerable.

Climate change already has brought about a rise of the sea level in Cuba at an annual rate of 2.04 mm in the last 40 years. Cuba also has had a longer summer, a shorter winter, and an increase in temperature by 0.6 degrees Celsius during the past 60 years, along with the most intense hurricanes in the first decade of this century.

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