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Destruction Left by Hurricane Irma in Cuba Adds to Unease about the Effects of Climate Change

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Hurricane Irma affected most of the Cuban archipelago, leaving behind a dozen deaths, floods, destruction, and worsening the local population's feelings of helplessness in the face of climate change. Cuba has been affected by severe droughts, rising sea levels, and floods in recent years.

Climate disruption is no longer an abstract topic of conversation for Cubans; it is a living nightmare, creating fears of losing homes, belongings, and crops.

Cubans have resigned themselves to the fact that summers are getting hotter and lasting longer—excessive heat is becoming an obsession, along with concerns about low water levels in the reservoirs and a drought that has starved cattle and ruined crops ([NotiCen, July 23, 2015](#)). Coastlines and beaches are eroding due to the rising sea level, and residents of low areas along the coast in Havana are dealing with waves at high tide that abruptly flood ground floors and garages.

For decades, Cuba's government implemented a hurricane warning system and massive evacuations that serve to avoid fatalities. However, the upsurge in increasingly violent hurricanes poses new challenges for the government. Storms have sparked outbreaks of protest such as those that arose in areas of Havana due to the lack of electric power and potable water after Irma.

A panorama of desolation

The wreckage left by Irma covered 13 of Cuba's 15 provinces. The eye of the hurricane made landfall in Cuba as a Category 5 and traveled along the northern coast, where thermoelectric plants, tourist facilities, hotels, and airports are located. The winds were measured at more than 200 km per hour, and more than 1.7 million people had to be evacuated. The flora and fauna of protected areas such as the Jardines del Rey archipelago were severely damaged.

Forty percent of the sugar mills were damaged, and 430,000 hectares of sugarcane, one of the country's main crops, were flattened. Oil infrastructure was "severely hit," with 90 wells damaged, as reported by the Empresa de Perforación y Extracción de Petróleo, a Cuban drilling and oil extraction enterprise. The organization noted, nonetheless, that those damages would not change this year's annual production. Cuba produces about 4 million tons of oil (just under 25 million barrels) annually and 1.1 billion cubic meters of gas ([NotiCen, Nov. 3, 2016](#)).

According to preliminary official reports, 4,288 homes were damaged in Havana, with 157 buildings completely collapsed and 986 partially collapsed, 818 roofs destroyed and 1,555 damaged. Some of the emblematic neighborhoods in the capital were flooded when water penetrated up to 300 meters inland. Centro Habana, among the damaged neighborhoods, is home to centuries-old, often unmaintained buildings that have been modified on the interior and where the residents live in cramped, overcrowded conditions.

The UN System in Cuba expects to help more than 2.1 million people in 33 municipalities of the seven provinces most affected by Irma. These projects are to be implemented in the next 18 months.

The budget is set at \$ 55.8 million, of which \$ 52.2 million is still needed. The UN has called on the international community to make contributions.

Apparently, the only benefit from the hurricane was the amount of fresh water that accumulated behind the dams: More than 200 reservoirs increased from 40% to 64% capacity in just over 72 hours. Cuba has been suffering through its worst drought in the last 110 years, and the rains caused by Irma raised water reserves by more than 280 million cubic meters, according to sources from the National Institute of Hydraulic Resources (Instituto Nacional de Recursos Hidráulicos, INRH).

Calamities in a different Cuba

Irma has also highlighted some of the realities of life in Cuba. Over the decades, Cubans awaiting the arrival of hurricanes were accustomed to the omnipresent figure of former Prime Minister and President Fidel Castro (1959-2008) talking with meteorologists and in constant communication with the people through television and radio. The political spectacle of Castro closely following the emergency situation later continued with visits to the devastated areas and through his direct dialogue with the population.

After Irma's passage, the Cubans criticized President Raúl Castro, 86, who was absent in the media and did not visit the victims. In the days after the storm, the presence of security forces in the streets was interpreted by Cubans as the government's attempt to contain any possible protest. Citizens saw little effort on their part to offer immediate assistance in the recovery, even though the streets were dark and full of downed trees and branches.

Irma also demonstrated that the government no longer has absolute control over the narrative of local events. Now, in the time of cell phones, internet access, and social networks, Cubans spread photos and videos of a variety and immediacy never before seen during a natural disaster in Cuba.

The hurricane helped to highlight the distance between the state press, which continues to repeat the usual government slogans, and the Cuban people, both in the country and abroad, who joined together to keep families in touch, to witness each community's losses, to complain about the authorities, and to ask for help for those most affected. "Irma destroyed everything in Cuba that was already broken," an eye witness noted on one of the social networks.

Fighting climate change

Studies on climate change were initiated by Cuba's science academy, the Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, in 1991 and were intensified in 2004 when two powerful hurricanes, Charley and Ivan, damaged the western part of the island. Last April, scientists presented a plan known as "Tarea Vida" (Assignment: Life) that aims to minimize the effects of climate change through fixed investments in 2020, 2030, 2050, and 2100.

Among the main objectives is to reduce the risks for residents along the coast. Sources from the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología y Medio Ambiente, CITMA) told the Cuban press that a sea level rise would mean a high chance that salt water will penetrate the water table and reduce the availability of fresh water for human consumption. Experts recommend increasing forested areas, restoring wetlands, protecting major mountain ranges, conserving watersheds and coastal areas, halting the deterioration of coral reefs and rehabilitating them, and encouraging the use of renewable energy, especially solar and wind power, among other measures.

Some indicators are quite telling. Evidence of erosion has been found in 82% of the island's 499 beaches, and by 2050, it is feared that the sea level could rise by about 27 centimeters. The rise in sea level has accelerated in the last five years. Drought is affecting 71% of the nation and 296 reservoirs. The Cuban archipelago has 20% less fresh water than in 1990, and by 2100 predictions are that its availability could be reduced by 37%.

The climate change issue promises to play an increasing role in Cuba. Weeks after Irma's passage, many Cubans say they still dream of the floods and the images of branches, furniture, and appliances floating through the streets of Havana.

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