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Massive Flooding Causes Severe Damage to Agriculture in Bolivia

by LADB Staff
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After two months of severe flooding, Bolivia's government declared a state of national emergency. Rains associated with the climate phenomenon known as El Nino caused massive damage to most of Bolivia's departments, dislocated hundreds of thousands of Bolivians, killed dozens, and created massive agricultural losses. Those departments that did not suffer flooding experienced crippling droughts or freezes. President Evo Morales announced that the land-reform process to redistribute idle agricultural lands would have to be temporarily stopped until there was a recovery from the flooding.

President Morales declares national disaster
The Bolivian government first declared a regional disaster in the eastern department of Santa Cruz on Jan. 18 as the waters of the Rio Grande rose, also threatening the department of Beni, where the Rio Grande drains.

By the end of January, two dozen were dead, Santa Cruz and the central department of Cochabamba were the worst hit, and the rains continued to fall. Rains had been doing damage since December. The Beni city of Trinidad was surrounded by the waters of the Rio Grande, protected only by a dyke, and faced imminent destruction for weeks.

Morales had ordered plans to evacuate the city of 90,000 people, but civil-defense officials said that a slightly raised highway ringing the city center would likely be enough to keep the water at bay. By March, six of nine departments had been badly hurt by the worst flooding in decades, with many highways rendered unusable, countless homes washed away, and aid-delivery systems faltering. Official estimates indicated that 385,000 to 500,000 Bolivians were victims of the floods.

Newspaper Los Tiempos de Cochabamba said on March 20 that 56 people had died during the environmental disaster and four were still missing. Tens of thousands of cattle were dead and 90% of many crops were destroyed, with loss estimates starting at US$250 million. Morales officially declared a national disaster on Feb. 28, committing some US$50 million to the crisis that had, at that time, killed 35 people and affected some 72,000 families. There were reports of outbreaks of diseases like dengue hemorrhagic fever, malaria, and leptospirosis.

President blames industrialized nations’ pollution
"The situation is very dramatic," Morales said at a news conference in La Paz after a helicopter trip over the wide stretch of the country's eastern lowlands that was still underwater. "There were houses out there in the rural areas where there wasn't even anywhere to land a helicopter and drop off food and medicine."
At the tail end of a rainy season supercharged by El Nino, the months of heavy rains have swamped a vast floodplain running from the Bolivian Andes north to the Amazon basin. Morales pointed to industrial pollution by more developed countries as a culprit in the climatic disaster. "There are countries that recklessly destroy the environment, and we poor countries have to put up with it," he said on Feb. 23. He also thanked regional neighbors for their assistance.

Bolivia struggles to get international aid

In late March, Morales presented a preliminary recovery plan after the natural disasters. "We believe the government made a very important effort to effectively carry forward preventive work and also manage the emergency situation," said the Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana on March 20. He thanked the international community for "the readiness, the availability, and the gestures of generosity and solidarity" that it had given Bolivia. "Of course, we are going to ask for international cooperation to join the effort of the state to confront [the crisis], in which many, many more resources than those we have used are going to be needed," said Quintana.

Early on in the crisis, Bolivia had trouble getting assistance for the disaster, though several nations began contributing as time went on. On Feb. 18, Quintana had said, "We think that we still can't count on sufficient international solidarity. I think that what is happening to the country is still not being appropriately evaluated. We are going to keep insisting that cooperation be turned toward the country."

On March 20, Quintana said the reconstruction plan would demand spending US$15 million, of which 75% would come from abroad and 25% from the national government. The Pentagon's Miami headquarters dispatched a planeload of humanitarian relief to eastern Bolivia, which suffered devastating floods on March 4. US forces loaded a C-130 Hercules airplane at Homestead Air Reserve Base with US$37,000 in relief supplies, supplies that included 4,800 water containers, 2,300 hygiene kits, 20 rolls of plastic sheeting, and four water pumps, each capable of draining 25,000 gallons per hour. The supplies came from the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Land-reform program put on hold because of floods

Hardest hit were the low-lying eastern departments of Beni and Santa Cruz, home to both Morales' most vocal opposition and much of the agricultural land he intends to redistribute as part of his sweeping land-reform program (see NotiSur, 2007-01-19). The land-reform law grants the government the power to expropriate land deemed idle or fraudulently obtained. But it also contains a clause indefinitely exempting disaster areas.

Critics accused Morales of delaying his emergency declaration to prevent the cessation of land reform. The president decreed a pause in the review of unproductive lands by the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA) in mid-March. The review was not scheduled to resume.
"until minimum conditions are re-established that will permit restarting productive operations and activities at each estate," according to the executive order. "While the interruption continues, the INRA will not investigate whether or not lands are cultivated."

The document said the pause would not suspend processes already begun or already at the point of beginning, which should be concluded in conformity with the laws covering the reform procedures. [Sources: www.bbbmundo.com, 02/24/07, 02/26/07; BBC News, 02/26/07; Associated Press, 02/28/07; El Tiempo (Colombia), 03/02/07; The Miami Herald, 03/05/07; La Republica (Peru), 03/06/07; Spanish news service EFE, 02/28/07, 03/07/07; El Universo (Ecuador), 03/08/07; El Comercio (Ecuador), 03/14/07; www.telesurtv.net, 01/19/07, 01/29/07, 01/31/07, 02/18/07, 02/23/07, 02/26/07, 02/27/07, 03/01/07, 03/05/07, 03/09/07, 03/14/07, 03/16/07; La Razon (Bolivia), 01/26/07, 01/31/067, 02/28/07, 03/05/07, 03/12/07, 03/14/07, 03/16/07; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 02/16/07, 02/23-28/07, 03/01/07, 03/05/07, 03/06/07, 03/14-16/07, 03/19/07; Los Tiempos (Bolivia), 01/31/07, 02/28/07, 03/05/07, 03/16/07, 03/20/07]

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