

4-28-2017

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Recommended Citation

ChanduvÁJaÃ±a, Elsa. "Flooding and Mudslides Reveal Peru's Failure to Prepare for Extreme Weather." (2017).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14512>

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Flooding and Mudslides Reveal Peru's Failure to Prepare for Extreme Weather

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Category/Department: Peru

Published: 2017-04-28

The process of reconstruction has now begun, after nearly three months of torrential rains, floods, and mudslides in both rural and urban areas of Peru left hundreds of thousands homeless and affected more than one million people.

The rain that fell in the departments of Tumbes, Piura, Lambayeque, Loreto, Ica, Ancash, Cajamarca, La Libertad, Huancavelica and provinces of Lima had left 107 dead and 171,322 homeless as of April 15, according to data from the Centro de Operaciones de Emergencia Nacional (National Emergency Operation Center, COEN). It was also reported that 22,761 homes were damaged. The intensity of the downpours was highest in February and March.

Meanwhile, the Ministerio de Transportes y Comunicaciones (Ministry of Transportation and Communication) reported that transit had been interrupted on 65 highways and blocked in 11 places in the north, south, and center of the country. The government reported that 170 shelters had been set up nationwide by April 18, providing refuge to 32,000 people.

The phenomenon that caused this disaster is the so-called Coastal Niño, the anomalous warming of the sea along the coast, which began in mid-January and has kept the water temperature four or five degrees Celsius above normal. Water temperatures climbed to 29 degrees Celsius in Peru, and to 28 degrees in Ecuador. Warmer sea temperatures resulted in considerable water evaporation followed by the heavy rains. The coastal winds that blow from south to north weakened during the first days of December 2016, allowing the entry of warm waters and also weakened the Humboldt Current, the cold water that runs south to north ([NotiSur, Feb. 25, 1992](#)).

Under the slogan, "A single force," the national government has responded quickly to the emergency, calling on the population to show solidarity with those most affected and declaring a state of emergency in 11 regions. The Ministry of Health declared a health emergency in nine departments—including Lima provinces, where most of the affected live. It also declared a yellow alert, pointing to a significant increase in the demand for health care, at all health facilities nationwide.

The entire government, the armed forces, business leaders, and the general public have joined forces to provide support to the homeless and others affected by the Coastal Niño. Nevertheless, emergency needs caused by the rains surpass the government's ability to respond.

Lack of prevention exacerbates problem

Pedro Ferradas, who leads the office in charge of risk management in disaster relief (Gestión de Riesgo de Desastres de Soluciones Prácticas), said that while it wouldn't have been possible to foresee the weather event that brought on the disaster, the country's vulnerability could have been reduced.

“This phenomenon is relatively surprising because there were no alert systems or any knowledge of how and when it could arrive,” Ferradas said in an interview with Noticias SER, a non-profit, rural news service. “Even though similar phenomena have occurred in Peru, this hadn’t happened in nearly 90 years. The last time similar data was recorded was in 1925, when rains battered almost the entire Peruvian coast, causing floods and problems similar to those registered now.”

Ferradas said the emergencies generated by the rains have exceeded the government’s capacity to respond because the strategy the government uses isn’t the most appropriate. “Although the armed forces have significant logistical and operative capacity, in such situations, one should turn to the resilience or organizational capacity of the affected population. And at no time did the central government call on the population for organized participation, and this, I believe, is a very serious political mistake that diminishes or weakens the ability to respond. Therefore, it increases the potential impact of a disaster.”

Defense Minister Jorge Nieto said a similar disaster must not be allowed to happen again, adding that to avoid similar situations, it was important to put prevention at the top of the government agenda at the central, regional, and municipal levels.

In an interview with La República, Nieto listed what he considers the priorities: to clean up the build-up and debris in the rivers, to widen and deepen river channels, and to withhold permits for building in areas in the way of rivers or waterways, or where mudslides are possible, something that will require urban planning. He suggested that sanctions be established for local officials who authorize holdings, properties, and constructions in places where there is a known risk.

According to COEN, budgets for disaster prevention were reduced in 2016 at the local level (municipal and provincial) in the four regions where 75% of the people most affected by the climate phenomenon are concentrated. The Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas (Ministry of Economy and Finance, MEF) said that local governments in the regions of Lambayeque, Ica, Piura, and La Libertad had used 64.4%, 67.5%, 68.2% and 76.6% of the money allotted for disaster prevention respectively, when 85% is considered an acceptable expenditure.

Óscar Benavides, president of the municipal group Asociación de Municipalidades del Perú (AMPE), countered that local governments had taken steps to spend the money in their budgets, but added that the budgets themselves were insufficient. “We do not use the funds earmarked for prevention because they fall short of what is needed; we spend the money when the emergency occurs,” he told El Comercio.

The MEF indicated that between 2016 and 2017, the budget that regions receive to reduce vulnerability and give attention to emergency disaster relief had been cut by 61%. But if the budget was insufficient, the fact is that the work done was insufficient as well.

Ferradas pointed out that even though there is a general law on risk management—and even a plan for public investment incentives for risk management in municipalities—it hasn’t had adequate success because there is no integral analysis of the risks. Nor is there a logic for investing money, he said, because more importance is given to spending the money in the budget than to how it is spent or to the quality of public spending.

For example, he said, in the case of risks and disasters, a wall to protect part of the population is built, but the flow of water is sent to another populated area that does not have a wall. Or

government money is used to build bridges or highways without taking into account that an area might be prone to mudslides or that a river could erode and destroy the infrastructure.

The task of reconstruction

The cost of the damage caused by the climate phenomenon through March 22 is estimated at US \$3.12 billion, equivalent to 1.6% of the national gross domestic product (GDP), according to the consulting firm Macroconsult. Based on reports from the National Institute of Civil Defense, the consulting firm calculates that damage to highways was US\$1.26 billion, accounting for 40% of the total; damage to the housing sector was US\$1.12 billion, or 36%; damage to bridges, US\$253 million, or 8% of the total; and losses in agricultural areas amount to US\$143 million or 6%; plus other damage to irrigation canals, rural roads, and health facilities.

On April 18, Fernando Zavala, the president of the Cabinet, told the news agency Agencia Peruana de Noticias that the reconstruction of the country would take three years and that the government would dictate steps to make municipalities accelerate the rehabilitation of urban lands. Reconstruction will begin in 2017, he said, and a great deal of the work would be done in 2018.

Zavala said that the government is now in the rehabilitation stage, which consists of helping those affected get back to their "day-to-day" lives and rebuilding the housing, health, and education infrastructure. Storm victims who are in shelters will move to 12,000 recently purchased, prefabricated temporary homes for 12 to 18 months; plans call for construction of a new housing system to follow. In the health field, the government is working on early fumigation to prevent a disease outbreak. He noted that only 26,000 of the 8 million public school students have not returned to school.

The media has reported on proposals for the reconstruction of the affected areas. The common view of experts, analysts, and opinion leaders is that the government should take the long view, with long-term prevention policies such as not building housing or bridges in high-risk zones.

Political analyst Sinesio López pointed out that this should include conditioning territory, creating major reservoirs, urban planning, construction of deep drainage in cities, and protecting rivers with walls and deep channels.

On April 19, the executive branch sent a bill to Congress proposing the creation of an agency to be known as the Autoridad para la Reconstrucción con Cambios (Reconstruction with Change Authority, RCC), empowered for a period of three years and led by the prime minister and the heads of the departments of Economy and Finance, Transportation and Communication, and Agriculture and Housing. On April 25, Congress approved its own version of the bill, which incorporates changes suggested by a number of legislators, including provisions making the Office of the Comptroller responsible for financial oversight and allowing Congress to decide whether the lifespan of the RCC should be expanded beyond three years.

The task ahead is seen as an opportunity to rebuild without the vulnerabilities that have affected so many people and left so much infrastructure damaged, especially given that the country may face similar climactic phenomenon in the future.

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