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Nicaragua: Updated Account Of Hurricane Disaster

by Deborah Tyroler

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As of Nov. 1, the Nicaraguan government had counted 116 dead, 178 seriously injured, and 110 missing, result of Hurricane Joan, which passed through the country on Oct. 21-22. Of 324,861 people who were evacuated from their homes before the hurricane arrived, 186,550 are homeless. Early this week, 60,000 were being housed in government shelters, while the remaining 126,550 were reportedly residing with friends and relatives or without shelter. The material damage caused by Hurricane Joan surpasses that of the last major natural disaster which affected Nicaragua, the 1972 earthquake. It also exceeds damages inflicted by Somoza's bombings of the cities during the 1979 insurrection, and seven years of war with the contras. Corn Island was leveled; all 7,500 residents lost their homes. Promar, a seafood processing plant, was destroyed, as were schools, the island's only clinic, and all churches and shops. An estimated 95% of fruit and other types of trees were downed by the winds. In Bluefields, 90% of homes, schools and government offices were destroyed. Hospital, post office, communications, electricity plant and major fishing company facilities were damaged or destroyed. Bluefields' 43,000 residents were made homeless overnight. At El Rama the river rose 46 feet and remained high for days. Two days after the water level had dropped, Mayor Samuel Mejia told a group of visiting aid agency representatives that 25,000 people had been seriously affected in the town and surrounding area. About 5,000 homes and food for 10,000 families for six months are needed, he said. El Rama's docking facilities, used as the transfer point for goods going overland and via river from Managua to Bluefields, have disappeared. Two of the town's three schools, its bank and all warehouses were destroyed. Extensive areas of Region V were either flooded or affected by high winds. Entire towns, including Acoyapa, Santo Domingo, Villa Sandino and La Gateada were virtually wiped out. Eighty percent of the region's buildings lost roofs. A estimated 90% of the bean and corn crops were lost, and 100,000 acres of forest destroyed. Regions IV and VI lying out of the direct path of the hurricane suffered extensive flood damage. Damages sustained in coffee-rich Region VI (Jinotega and Matagalpa) threaten the country's already weakened economy. In this region, 48 died. Next, 10 bridges were washed out, and 365 miles of roadway rendered unusable. The damage to roads and bridges may prevent the harvest of a large portion of the region's coffee crop, now prematurely ripening. In Region IV, in the hills west of the town of Rivas, heavy flooding destroyed some 34,000 acres of crops. Twenty-three people were killed. Overall, 339 schools were destroyed: 110 in the southern Atlantic coast region and 190 in Region V. Three hospitals, 10 health centers and 18 local health posts were damaged. "We're not talking about damages to just one crop or just one area. The destruction is nationwide," said Salvador Mayorga, deputy minister of agriculture. He estimated crop export revenues could drop by \$40 million to \$50 million this year, equivalent to nearly 25% of last year's total export income. Summarized below are preliminary reports on economic losses based on information available Nov. 1. Subsequent tables present preliminary reports on casualties and infrastructure damage by region, released by the government on Oct. 28. * Coffee: 20% of exports estimated lost due to direct damage and destruction of roads and bridges. * Bananas: \$2.5 million in exports lost, 25% of last year's total. * African palm: 80% destroyed. * Sugar: Kukra Hill refinery and nearly all sugar cane production lost in South Atlantic region. * Cattle: 10,000 to 15,000 head of cattle killed; 54,000 cattle at risk from disease and inadequate medicine supplies, affecting meat and dairy production for export

and domestic consumption. * Basic grains: Reduced harvests of rice, beans, corn and sorghum crops. * Fisheries: 75% of fishing industry damaged. * An estimated 100,000 farmers and their families experienced the loss of crops, stock, seeds and tools. * Forests: 100,000 acres of virgin tropical forest may be lost. In addition to impacts on the lumber industry and damage to the shrimp industry, Nicaraguan and foreign officials fear long-term ecological effects, including increased risk of erosion and flooding. Preliminary estimates indicate that regeneration of the forestlands may require 30 years and millions of dollars. * Infrastructure: In addition to the damage and destruction of roads, bridges and docking facilities (including wharves and warehouses), the deep-water port at Bluff is now completely unusable. Prior to the hurricane, several years of port construction activities had nearly been complete. The port would have provided an Atlantic gateway for exports.

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