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Government Criticized for Failure to Prepare, Inadequate Response to Hurricane

by LADB Staff

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President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and state and local authorities have been strongly criticized for a lack of preparation to deal with the impact of Hurricane Pauline, which hit Mexico in early October. Hurricane Pauline which registered wind speeds as high as 150 miles per hour devastated entire communities and caused hundreds of deaths in southern and western Mexico, particularly in the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Michoacan. The hurricane's impact was worsened by heavy rain from Tropical Storm Olaf, which arrived in Michoacan state in late September.

According to critics, including members of the Chamber of Deputies, the federal government and state and local authorities failed to take necessary precautions to protect citizens, such as providing proper warning, preparing evacuation plans, or setting up shelters. Responding to the criticisms, the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SG) said its civil-protection division had kept local authorities informed about the "extreme danger" of Hurricane Pauline at least six days in advance. Apparently, many residents ignored the storm warnings.

However, critics say the warnings did not include recommendations for evacuation. Moreover, others suggested that the lack of preparation reflects a general negligence in developing mechanisms to respond to disasters. For example, Mexico did not create any formal civil-protection system until after the Mexico City earthquake in 1985, which caused major damage to the capital. "Our country must totally restructure its emergency- response systems," acknowledged deputy interior secretary Ricardo Garcia Villalobos.

Acapulco suffers major damage

Much of the international publicity on the storm centered on heavy loss of life in the fragile shantytowns outside the resort city of Acapulco. According to critics, local authorities failed to take the proper steps to evacuate residents, who were buried by mudslides caused by heavy rain. Political columnist Ivan Restrepo of the daily newspaper La Jornada blamed massive corruption of local officials for the proliferation of the shantytowns on the hillsides outside Acapulco. Many of these homes were built on dry river beds and cleared land, which is prone to erosion. "These shantytowns were tolerated as long as residents promised to vote for the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)," Restrepo said.

For his part, President Zedillo promised to provide adequate assistance to the communities affected by the storm. "Even though we have to cut our budget in other places, we will spend what it takes to repair the damage," said Zedillo during a tour of damaged areas in Guerrero state. While the government was able to send immediate help to Acapulco, critics said much of this assistance was channeled first to areas that serve the tourism industry and high-income residential areas. Some residents complained they had not received any clean water for 10 days, while the major

hotels had drinking water restored almost immediately. Government slow to send aid to isolated areas Assistance was also slow to reach isolated areas, particularly Indian communities in Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Chiapas.

Oaxaca Gov. Diodoro Carrasco said authorities were having a difficult time distributing food, clothing, medicines, and other supplies to about 1,200 isolated villages in the state because of blocked roads. Among other problems, the hurricane destroyed supplies of clean water, generating concern about an outbreak of diseases such as dengue fever, cholera, and malaria. By mid-October, authorities had confirmed 20 cases of cholera in Acapulco, but the number is probably much higher in isolated communities that lack access to medical treatment.

The storm also caused significant agricultural losses in the region. In Oaxaca state, for example, producers lost an estimated 180,000 ha planted in coffee, bananas, beans, corn, lemons, papaya, and peanuts. The Oaxaca-based Union de Productores de Cafe de la Costa said the storm destroyed the equivalent of 192,000 60-pound bags of coffee. Authorities said the coffee region of San Agustin Loxicha experienced the worst damage. In Chiapas, the Federacion de Sociedades Cooperativas de la Industria Pesquera de la Costa said Pauline and Olaf caused about 18 million pesos (US\$2.33 million) in losses for the state's fishing cooperatives. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 22, reported at 7.71 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Reuter, 10/10/97, 10/13/97; Los Angeles Times, 10/14/97; El Economista, 10/16/97, 10/17/97; Proceso, 10/19/97; The News, 10/10/97, 10/14-16/97, 10/21/97; Associated Press, 10/14/97, 10/15/97, 10/21/97; El Universal, 10/09/97, 10/14-17/97, 10/20/97, 10/21/97; Excelsior, Novedades, 10/09/97, 10/14- 17/97, 10/20/97, 10/22/97; La Jornada, 10/14/97, 10/15/97, 10/16/97, 10/20/97, 10/21/97, 10/22/97)

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