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Chiapas Elections in Doubt Because of Severe Storm Damage

by LADB Staff

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Representatives of the two largest political parties in Chiapas state have asked electoral authorities to postpone next month's state legislative and municipal elections because of devastation caused by severe storms in mid-September. The elections are scheduled for Oct. 4, but some members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) have asked the Consejo Estatal Electoral (CEE) that the vote be postponed until early December. Heavy rainfall associated with Tropical Storm Javier devastated entire communities, primarily in coastal areas of the state, leaving at least 450,000 persons homeless.

The government's official estimates put the death toll from the storm and ensuing floods at 162 as of Sept. 17. However, unofficial estimates provided by relief organizations and independent sources suggest the death toll could eventually surpass 1,000, which would exceed the toll caused by Hurricane Pauline in October 1997 (see SourceMex, 10/22/97). "The elections cannot be held in Chiapas under current conditions," PRD national president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador told reporters in mid-September. Marcos Bucio Mujica, director of social action for the PRI, said the principal reason to delay the elections is that many residents in affected areas lost their voter identification cards.

Nongovernmental organizations support postponement

Several nongovernmental organizations such as Alianza Civica, Coalicion de Organizaciones Autonomas de Ocosingo, and Democracia Social have joined the request to postpone the elections for mayors and representatives to the state legislature. Spokespersons for the organizations contend the storm left too many communities without adequate infrastructure to conduct a fair election. "The elections are very important for Chiapas," said Erwin Reyes, a representative for Caritas, a Catholic charitable organization. "But right now, we are more interested in how we are going to feed people."

The center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) initially considered asking for the postponement but decided to press for the voting to take place on schedule. The PAN, which argues that a postponement would violate the state constitution, has a very small representation in the state legislature but holds the mayoral post in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez. For the election to be postponed, the Chiapas CEE has to present a formal request to the state legislature, which is dominated by the PRI and PRD. State legislative leader Juan Carlos Bonifaz of the PRI said the Chiapas legislature is considering postponing the elections only in communities devastated by the recent floods.

CEE spokespersons said the commission is preparing to hold the elections Oct. 4, but is monitoring the situation very closely in villages affected by heavy rain and flooding. In response to the disaster, the federal government sent 10,000 soldiers and thousands of other workers to rescue trapped

victims, rebuild bridges, clear mud and boulders, and restore electricity and running water to affected areas. The government was also providing clothing, shelter, and medicine to 23,000 people living in temporary shelters. The medical assistance was particularly important because the storm brought outbreaks of cholera, dengue fever, malaria, and other diseases. PRI accused of using disaster aid to promote party candidates The PAN, the PRD, and several nongovernmental organizations have accused the PRI of using the disaster to promote its candidates. The two opposition parties allege that the federal and state governments are channeling assistance primarily to areas that have supported the PRI in the past.

In Tonalá, the PRI candidate for mayor was in charge of delivering assistance to flood victims. Tonalá is one of the few municipalities in Chiapas currently governed by the PAN. "Every day we receive more complaints that certain political parties are attaching conditions to the aid," said Mario Luis Fuentes, a spokesperson for the relief organization Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF). Several human rights groups demanded that the government provide more assistance through the Red Cross and other independent organizations. "We demand that the aid be channeled through humanitarian and impartial organizations to guarantee a more just distribution," said representatives of the Roman Catholic diocesan centers Fray Matías de Córdoba and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in San Cristóbal de las Casas and Tapachula.

Storm causes severe damage to agriculture, fisheries

Tropical Storm Javier also caused severe damage to the agriculture, livestock, and fisheries industries in Chiapas. The Cámara Nacional de Comercio (CANACO) in Tapachula said the storm caused more than US\$1.5 billion in damage to 200,000 hectares of corn, soybeans, cotton, coffee, cocoa, bananas, sugar cane, African palm, and other crops. About 30,000 ha of coffee in the Soconusco and Fraylesca regions were damaged, said Agriculture Secretary Romarico Arroyo Marroquín. CANACO said the storm also affected thousands of people who make a living catching shrimp and other seafood in the coastal communities of Arriaga, Pijijiapan, and Tonalá.

The Secretaría del Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca (SEMARNAP) said the storm destroyed or severely damaged almost one-third of the nearly 5,800 fishing boats registered in Chiapas. Speaking to the Chamber of Deputies, Agriculture Secretary Arroyo Marroquín said the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería y Desarrollo Rural (SAGAR) has allocated an initial 40 million pesos (US\$3.9 million) to assist agricultural and fisheries producers in coastal areas of Chiapas. Arroyo Marroquín said the Zedillo administration will eventually allocate more funds to assist the sectors but he did not say how much money would be forthcoming.

In mid-September, Zedillo said the government is adjusting the budgets of several secretariats to reallocate more funds for disaster relief in Chiapas, including assistance to agriculture and reconstruction of at least 25,000 homes. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 23, reported at 10.11 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 09/15/98; The Washington Post, 09/16/98; The New York Times, 09/12/98, 09/14/98, 09/17/98; Spanish news service EFE, 09/15-17/98; Reuters, 09/16/98, 09/17/98; San Antonio Express-News, 09/17/98; Proceso, 09/13/98, 09/20/98; Associated Press, 09/10/98, 09/14-16/98, 09/21/98; El Universal, 09/11/98, 09/14/98, 09/17/98, 09/18/98, 09/21/98; El Financiero Internacional, 09/21/98; La Jornada, 09/14/98, 09/15/98, 09/17/98, 09/18/98, 09/21-23/98; Excelsior, 09/14/98, 09/15/98, 09/17/98,

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