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## **Government Criticized For Delays in Assisting Victims of Devastating Storms**

*by LADB Staff*

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The Mexican government has come under fire for its slow response to the victims of devastating storms in several Mexican states in early October. Torrential rains lingered for several days in a wide area of central and southern Mexico, resulting in hundreds of deaths and heavy damage to personal property, crops, and basic infrastructure.

The states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Tabasco, and Veracruz suffered the lion's share of the damage, although losses extended to adjacent areas in Michoacan, Jalisco, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Mexico states. Official statistics confirmed that the catastrophe claimed the lives of at least 340 victims, although relief organizations expect the death toll eventually to climb to 600 or more.

The majority of the deaths occurred in coastal cities and in the mountainous areas of Puebla state, where collapsing hillsides buried entire communities or neighborhoods. The heavy losses brought complaints that President Ernesto Zedillo's administration took too long to begin relief and rescue operations in the affected areas. Those delays left many communities without fresh water, food, fuel, and other basic necessities.

"The country is outraged," said columnist Luis Eduardo Villarreal of the daily newspaper Reforma. "The greatest misfortune is...official incompetence." Administration spokespersons defended the delays, saying the government was unable to immediately mobilize assistance to these areas because weather conditions made rescue flights too dangerous.

In addition, they said, washed-out roads and damaged bridges prevented trucks from reaching victims in the more remote areas. The delays were compounded by the administration's initial refusal to accept offers of emergency assistance from the US, the UN, the European Union (EU), and other sources. At a press conference on Oct. 11, deputy interior secretary Javier Lozano Alarcon defended the administration's stance, saying Mexico had declined the offers of assistance because it already had all the resources it needed to deal with the situation.

Furthermore, said Alarcon, even if Mexico had an immediate need for foreign assistance, the country was unable logistically to efficiently distribute it. But some Mexican legislators, including members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), criticized the administration's rejection of foreign aid. "We are not in any position to make such a decision, given the magnitude of the disaster we have suffered," said PRI Sen. Samuel Aguilar Solis.

The protests forced the administration to change its stance and begin to accept offers of assistance from nongovernmental organizations and foreign governments. The offers included US\$100,000

in immediate aid from the US government and unspecified assistance from the EU, which will be channeled through the Mexican Red Cross.

As part of the domestic relief and rescue efforts, the administration allocated about 2.34 billion pesos (US\$243 million) from the Fondo Nacional de Desastres Naturales (FONDEN). The rescue operations involved mobilizing thousands of soldiers, state police, and health workers to bring food, medicine, and supplies to affected communities, rescue stranded persons, repair roads and bridges, and construct shelters. Still, relief was slow to reach many isolated locations, raising concerns about the spread of diseases such as cholera, malaria, and dengue fever. To reduce the incidence of these diseases, the government is planning to fumigate wide areas of Veracruz, Puebla, Hidalgo, and Tabasco states.

### *Rescue operations have electoral implications*

The government's handling of the disaster relief could carry electoral implications. A report published by the daily newspaper El Universal said the Zedillo administration had granted permission to only one PRI presidential candidate, Francisco Labastida, to visit the disaster sites in an official capacity. Labastida, a former interior minister, is widely believed to be Zedillo's choice to gain the nomination in the PRI primary scheduled for Nov. 7.

Two of Labastida's rivals, Manuel Bartlett Diaz and Roberto Madrazo Pintado, are former or current governors of the affected states. Bartlett completed his six-year term as Puebla governor in early 1999, while Madrazo requested leave from his post as governor of Tabasco to devote full time to his electoral campaign. Madrazo, who has strongly criticized the PRI establishment in his electoral campaign, accused Zedillo of failing to include Tabasco in his tours of devastated areas.

"In other states [hit by flooding], assistance plans are being drawn up in different federal ministries: Agriculture, Social Development, Health, and Education," said Madrazo. "And in Tabasco no one has bothered even to put out an official communique. Why, Mr. President?"

The presidential candidates from the leading opposition parties have also criticized the administration's handling of the disaster. Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who will represent the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in the 2000 election, criticized the government for spending too little on the rescue operations.

The PRD candidate also said the impact of the disaster could have been reduced if the PRI-led government had not cut funding for flood-control projects. "The government has not assumed its social responsibility in the face of the backward conditions of the country," Cardenas told reporters.

Vicente Fox Quesada, the nominee of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), accused the PRI of engaging in "political opportunism" to promote Labastida's candidacy and the PRI's agenda during visits to the affected areas. Fox also said Labastida's gesture of donating thousands of pesos to flood victims from his campaign was a charade. These funds, said Fox, actually came from the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), which Labastida headed until his resignation earlier this year.

Mayors and other local officials in Veracruz and Puebla also criticized the PRI for using the rescue operations to promote Labastida's candidacy. "I asked the assistants to [Gov. Melquiades Morales] if they only care about us when they are asking for our vote," said Maximiliano Palacios Andres, a city official in the Puebla municipality of Patla. Similarly, the opposition-affiliated mayors of Tecolutla, Papantla, and Gutierrez Zamora accused Veracruz Gov. Miguel Aleman Velasco of the PRI of diverting assistance to municipalities headed by the governing party while ignoring those governed by the opposition.

### *Thousands of hectares of crops damaged*

The torrential rains inflicted moderate to heavy damage to crops in central and southern Mexico. Preliminary statistics compiled by the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia y Desarrollo Rural (SAGAR) indicate the torrential rain damaged more than 240,000 ha of basic grains and other crops in the affected states. At least 90,000 families incurred losses because of the damage, SAGAR said. The SAGAR estimates suggest the damage may reduce agricultural production by 20% in Puebla, Veracruz, Tabasco, and Hidalgo states this year.

Separately, coffee growers in the four-state region say the torrential rains may ultimately reduce their production for this year by 5% to 20%. However, many growers said their greatest concern was washed-out roads, which prevented them from bringing their coffee beans to roasters. In contrast to the heavy rain in central and southern Mexico, the northcentral areas of the country were continuing to feel the impact of a severe drought.

Estimates released in mid-October by government agencies and private agricultural groups say the drought caused heavy losses of corn and bean crops in the states of Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Durango, Coahuila, and parts of Jalisco this year. In late August, Zacatecas Gov. Ricardo Monreal asked the federal government to issue a second disaster declaration in his state because of the continuing impact of dry conditions (see SourceMex, 1999- 08-25).

The Union Nacional de Trabajadores Agrícolas (UNTA) said farmers in Zacatecas lost 60% of their corn and bean crops, while losses in Aguascalientes could reach 90% in some areas. In Coahuila, the drought destroyed about 30,000 ha of cropland. The UNTA said the drought in the northcentral areas and the torrential rains in central and southern Mexico could result in the loss of 40% of the country's basic-grain production this year.

But Agriculture Secretary Romarico Arroyo Marroquin said the reduced production should not have a major impact on Mexico's overall food supply this year. "From the standpoint of food supplies in the domestic market, we don't think there will be any shortages," said Arroyo Marroquin. However, he said states affected by the disasters could experience some localized shortages of foods and vegetables.

### *Poor environmental planning contributes to disaster*

Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Julia Carabias acknowledged that the failure of successive PRI-led governments to incorporate environmental concerns into growth plans probably contributed to the disaster. "We are learning the painful lesson that our country has taken the wrong

direction in planning our communities," Carabias told participants at a recent environmental forum in Mexico City.

Carabias said her ministry was planning to devote 30 billion pesos (US\$3.12 billion) through the Programas de Desarrollo Regional Sustentable (PRODER) to correct some of the environmental problems that contributed to the disaster. Many communities that felt the brunt of the devastation in Puebla state were constructed on fragile hillsides where vast sections of forest had been cleared.

A series of mud slides buried whole sections of Teziutlan and Mixun, killing several residents and burying whole neighborhoods. Some estimates say that 300,000 to 700,000 ha of forests disappear in Mexico each year.

In lower areas as well, misguided policies, which allowed the construction of homes on riverbanks, marshes, and swamps, caused the disasters. In Villahermosa, for example, a large portion of the flooding occurred in areas that at one time had held lagoons. Federal Deputy Ana Lila Ceballos Trujeque said these practices are not only ecologically unsound, but also a violation of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. This article prohibits the transfer of rivers and lakes, including shores and banks, to private individuals.

But federal Deputy Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, a strong advocate of forest preservation, said the devastation was a symptom of a serious structural problem: poverty. In a column published in the daily newspaper Reforma, Aguilar Zinser said a number of the victims were forced to build shantytowns and unstable homes on hillsides because of a lack of housing in the cities.

"Our country's poor...who do not have access to public services and have no housing options...have settled by the millions on the hillsides, in river beds, at the bottoms of canyons, and in all those other places where the forces of nature can cause their greatest damage," said Aguilar. "As is the case with everything in Mexico, safety and space are not equally distributed, and therefore disasters disproportionately affect those who have less." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 20, reported at 9.61 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Los Angeles Times, 10/12/99; San Antonio Express-News, 10/13/99; Spanish news service EFE, 10/14/99; Notimex, 10/07/99, 10/11/99, 10/13/99, 10/14/99; The New York Times, 10/11/99, 10/15/99; The Washington Post, 10/08/99, 10/09/99, 10/12/99, 10/14/99; Inter Press Service, 10/15/99; The Dallas Morning News, 10/08-10/99, 10/16/99; Proceso, 10/10/99, 10/17/99; Reuters, 10/05-07/99, 10/10-12/99, 10/14/99, 10/18/99; Agence France-Presse, 10/14/99, 10/15/99, 10/18/99; Associated Press, 10/05/99, 10/08/99, 10/10/99, 10/12/99, 10/18/99, 10/19/99; Reforma, 10/15/99, 10/19/99; The News, 10/12/99, 10/15/99, 10/18/99, 10/19/99; El Universal, 10/11-15/99, 10/18/99, 10/19/99; Novedades, 10/06-08/99, 10/11-15/99, 10/18/99, 10/19/99; El Economista, 10/12/99, 10/18/99, 10/19/99; Excelsior, 10/06/99, 10/07/99, 10/11-13/99, 10/15/99, 10/20/99; La Jornada, 10/06/99, 10/07/99, 10/11-15/99, 10/18/99, 10/19/99, 10/20/99)

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