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Corruption, government inaction, and global climate change are among the factors that might have worsened the impact of a severe storm that caused major flooding, landslides, and other problems in Tabasco and Chiapas states in early November. The storm forced hundreds of thousands of residents to evacuate in the two-state area and caused Villahermosa, the state capital of Tabasco, to experience unprecedented flooding.

Some critics say the impact of the storm was exacerbated by corruption during the administrations of Tabasco ex-governors Roberto Madrazo and Manuel Andrade, who allegedly misused federal money allocated to build infrastructure to prevent floods. But others say any measures would have done little to alleviate the situation, given that global climate change has caused the waters of the Gulf of Mexico to become warmer and greatly increased the potential for flooding. The storms resulted in heavy flooding in the two states, displacing more than 1 million residents.

The floodwaters covered about 80% of the state of Tabasco and affected 30 of the 118 municipalities in Chiapas. Additionally, the rain caused heavy erosion in some mountainous areas, resulting in a massive landslide in the community of San Juan Grijalva in Chiapas. Villahermosa likened to post-Katrina New Orleans Some observers likened the devastation in Villahermosa to the impact of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 (see SourceMex, 2005-09-14).

A week after the disaster, about 20,000 residents of the Tabasco state capital remained stranded on their rooftops, in a scene reminiscent of Katrina. About 100,000 residents were left wandering the streets the day after the storm, while another 70,000 were able to find shelter at sites set up by state and federal authorities.

A large number of the residents who were evacuated were taken to shelters in neighboring Veracruz state. "We have our own New Orleans here in Villahermosa," said Tabasco Gov. Andres Granier Melo in a radio interview. The governor said many residents might not be able to return to their homes for as long as three months. "We hope when the waters recede we won't find bodies inside the homes, like in New Orleans," he said.

There are other parallels to Katrina. The flooding in Villahermosa was more severe than it would have been under normal conditions because levees built along area rivers were unable to contain water from the swollen waterways. "Villahermosa is a basin, just like New Orleans," said Granier. "We are below the water level of the Grijalva, Usumacinta, and De la Sierra rivers." The governor accused the state-run utility Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE) of exacerbating the problem by releasing massive amounts of water into the area rivers from the Penitas dam in Chiapas state just days before the storms hit.
CFE director Alfredo Elias Ayub acknowledged that the water was released from the dam into nearby rivers but said there could have been an even worse disaster if the dam had overflowed. Granier said the flooding could have been minimized if the federal government had proceeded with its plan to construct the appropriate infrastructure in recent years. "I told President [Felipe] Calderon that we were in dire need of infrastructure," said the governor. "This was a plan that was announced two presidencies ago and that was never carried out." Villahermosa was also flooded in 1999 after heavy rains, although the severity of the floods was much less.

The situation at that time was also blamed on the management of the Penitas dam and the lack of infrastructure. Former Tabasco governors accused of misusing federal funds Some critics said the inaction by Granier's two predecessors, ex-Govs. Madrazo and Andrade, contributed to the problems. Like Granier, Madrazo and Andrade are both members of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Following the 1999 floods, then President Ernesto Zedillo pledged 500 million pesos (US$46.3 million) to address the problem through a comprehensive water-management plan. "The plan was reduced to the construction of a few cement walls," said private energy consultant David Shields, who said it was uncertain whether the full funding actually came or whether it was diverted by the Madrazo government for other purposes.

The Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said it obtained a recent report from the state-run oil company PEMEX to the Mexican Congress acknowledging the transfer of 1.97 billion pesos (US$182 million) to the Madrazo and Andrade administrations to construct anti-flooding infrastructure and reinforced housing for people who live in high-risk areas. The total included 15 million pesos (US $1.3 million) awarded to the Tabasco government in 2001, the first year of Andrade's administration. "There was no evidence that the money was used for its intended purpose," said La Jornada, quoting the PEMEX report.

Madrazo did not respond directly to the allegations but accused some members of the print and broadcast media "of not having anything better to do than to sow hate, offend, and confront at a time that Mexico is suffering because of the situation in Tabasco." The ex-governor said he has started an effort to raise funds to assist victims of the disaster. Deputy Beatriz Pagues, a PRI spokesperson in the Chamber of Deputies, rejected the accusations against the two ex-governors but did not offer any evidence to refute the charges. "[This is an effort] to make political hay of a human tragedy," Pagues said in an interview with the official news agency Notimex.

Others said the federal government was at fault for not imposing tight restrictions on how the Tabasco state government used the funds. "Were there any audits?" asked Ciro Gomez, a columnist for Vanguardia, a newspaper based in Saltillo, Coahuila state. PEMEX occasionally reinvests its profits in some of its major oil-producing states, including Tabasco. Some critics say the oil-producing states deserve to keep more money from their natural resources. "Isn't there a way to reinvest the profits from crude-oil exports back into the producing states without having to go through the governors?" energy consultant Shields wrote in a column published in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.
"We must recognize that Tabasco is a victim of the way we distribute our natural resources," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. "The people of Tabasco, as well as those in Campeche and Chiapas, pay an enormous environmental cost for the exploitation of petroleum and generation of electricity within their borders." Sarmiento continued, "In other countries, the rules are different. A portion of the resources often remains in the producing state, which assumes both the environmental cost and the economic benefits of energy production."

Other columnists said disaster assistance has been politicized and its distribution affected by corruption at the federal level over the years. "The root of the problem is that corruption in different administrations has left little confidence in the government's ability to respond to such contingencies," said Julio Hernandez Lopez, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. He said the problem was evident as recently as during the administration of ex-President Vicente Fox, where Carmen Segura Rangel, the director of the office of civil protection, was accused of diverting 1.2 billion pesos (US$111 million) that had been destined for the federal disaster-relief fund (Fondo de Desastres Naturales, FONDEN) in 2005 (see SourceMex, 2005-10-12).

Beyond the misuse of money that would have gone toward infrastructure development, critics faulted the government at all levels for failing to take other precautions. "There are many inexpensive measures that can be systematically adopted in disaster-prone countries to reduce the impact of hazards. Risk assessments, early warning systems, evacuation plans, education and land-use planning are a few of the many cost-effective and reliable nonstructural ways to prevent floods from becoming disasters," said Salvano Briceno, director of the UN secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). "Many nonstructural measures are within the financial means of most communities to implement."

Global climate change said to boost storm intensity

Global climate change has also become part of the conversation in the aftermath of the heavy floods. The flooding occurred only days after a tragic accident at an oil-drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico (see SourceMex, 2007-10-31). In both cases, Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada and other federal officials pointed to changes in water levels and temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico, which they said was the result of global climate change. This theory is supported by environmental organizations like Greenpeace and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The discussion about the impact of global warming has also reached the Mexican media. "The change in global climate without doubt has had an influence on the [severity] of rainfall," the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal said in an editorial. "Nevertheless, we have to analyze how this tragedy could have been averted if the proper actions had been taken." "Higher walls could have stopped the water from invading certain locations," said Sarmiento. "But it is hard to imagine a barrier high enough to prevent the type of flooding that left 80% of the state under water."

Adolfo Gonzalez Ruiz, a columnist for Monterrey-based El Porvenir, said the Gulf of Mexico remains very vulnerable. "Yesterday it was New Orleans, today it is Tabasco, perhaps tomorrow it could be Tampico," he said.
Sarmiento offered a similar opinion. "In 2005, New Orleans ended up below water while Cancun
was hit hard by Hurricane Wilma (see SourceMex, 2005-11-02 and 2005-11-09)," said the columnists.
"In 2007, Dean battered the center of Quintana Roo, while floods also affected Bangladesh and
England. Global warming had much to do with these phenomena."

A recent report from the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) said flooding
has already displaced 140 million people around the world this year and caused four times as much
devastation as last year. While the comparisons to New Orleans are appropriate for the situation in
Villahermosa, a more accurate example for the region as a whole is Hurricane Stan, which stalled
over a large area of southern Mexico in 2005, creating floods in a wide area of southern Mexico (see
SourceMex, 2005-10-12, 2005-11-12).

The recent disaster, much like Stan, was particularly hard on low-income communities and
neighborhoods. "Flooding is one of the most easily predicted natural hazards, but not enough is
done to prepare and protect the poor, the people most affected by flooding," said the UNISDR.
"Poor people have fewer means to adapt their living conditions before or after flooding and are
often constrained by circumstance to live in high-risk areas such as slopes, flood plains, and ravines,
which are prone to landslides and floods."

Calderon pledges funds for recovery, prevention

President Felipe Calderon promised to develop a comprehensive plan "that is not political, but
technical" for the region to bring the necessary improvements and additions in infrastructure to
prevent future flooding. But Shields questioned whether Calderon would be able to make good on
this promise, given a potential cost of US$10 billion. Shields pointed out that other plans intended to
bring development and prosperity to the region, such as the Plan Puebla Panama (see SourceMex,
2001-07-11 and NotiCen, 2007-04-19) and the Proyecto Fenix petrochemical complex (see SourceMex,
2004-10-27), have not become a reality.

Shields proposed that the government use its foreign currency reserves, which stand at about US$74
billion, for capital projects, including reconstruction of Tabasco. Calderon also faced some criticism
for what some considered a slow and inadequate response to the disasters in Tabasco and Chiapas.
The Mexican president, who pledged 7 billion pesos (US$648 million) for reconstruction efforts,
visited the disaster zone three times, even canceling a trip to a summit of Latin American leaders in
Chile on Nov. 8-10. But many questioned his decision to send only 8,500 federal troops to assist to
the area, given the magnitude of the disaster.

One critic accused Calderon and his wife Margarita Zavala of using the trips to Tabasco and Chiapas
for photo opportunities. "Felipe and Margarita were present on location, working shoulder to
shoulder with the victims at least while photographs were being taken and video cameras were
rolling," said La Jornada's Julio Hernandez Lopez.

One of the politicians who levied the criticisms at the Calderon administration in the aftermath
of the floods was his rival in the 2006 presidential election, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a
Tabasco native. Lopez Obrador, who has set up a site in Mexico City to collect supplies for victims
in Tabasco, called for an investigation of the policies behind the release of the water at Penitas. He
contends the CFE is underutilizing hydroelectric facilities like Penitas because of its move to buy more of its electricity from private sources.

Because of a lack of use, the CFE is having to release water from its facilities, he contends. In addition, Calderon was criticized for his delay in accepting assistance from foreign governments and international organizations like Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Germany’s Aktion Deutschland Hilft. Among the countries offering aid were Cuba, Venezuela, Guatemala, Peru, the US, Nicaragua, and Switzerland. At home, the Mexican Senate voted to donate about 3.2 million pesos (US$296,000), with each member of the upper house giving up 10% of his or her monthly salary for November and December. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Nov. 7, reported at 10.79 pesos per US$1.00]