9-25-2013

Severe Storms Hit Mexico From Both Coasts, Causing Severe Damage in Much of the Country

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Severe Storms Hit Mexico From Both Coasts, Causing Severe Damage in Much of the Country

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2013-09-25

The effect of climate change and decades of corruption—poor urban planning, shoddy home construction, and a lack of zoning regulations—combined to create a recipe for misery in Mexico in mid-September. Two tropical systems—the remnants of Hurricane Ingrid along the Gulf of Mexico and Tropical Storm Manuel on the West Coast—converged in Mexico during the weekend of Sept. 14-15, causing significant property and agricultural damage and forcing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Dozens of people were reported dead or missing, and some entire communities were buried by mudslides. This was the first time in 50 years that major storms hit the Gulf of Mexico and the country’s Pacific coast simultaneously.

The two storms had caused at least 115 deaths in 29 states as of Sept. 23, but the number might climb because dozens of people are still missing. The Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) believes the death toll could eventually reach 200, with mudslides affecting some mountain communities such as La Pintada in Guerrero state, where an avalanche of mud left 68 people missing.

While the storms affected 29 of Mexico’s 31 states, the most dramatic damage was reported in nine states, with Guerrero, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz hit especially hard. Manuel dropped about 2 feet of rain in Guerrero, triggering mudslides that left hundreds of communities incommunicado. The storm also trapped an estimated 40,000 tourists in Acapulco for the Sept. 16 independence holiday weekend.

In addition to the loss of life, the loss of property was extensive, with the government estimating some damage to at least 1.5 million homes. Public infrastructure, including bridges, highways, and power lines, also suffered significant damage. Extensive road repairs will be required in Guerrero, Michoacán, Chiapas, Colima, Veracruz, and Tamaulipas, said the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT).

High recovery costs anticipated

Recovery efforts are expected to result in a huge financial outlay. The Congress, which had already expected increased deficits in the next two years to accommodate President Enrique Peña Nieto’s planned infrastructure expenditures, will have to allow even greater deficits to cover the expected cost of recovery. At present the Fondo Nacional para Desastres Naturales (FONDEN) has about 12 billion pesos (US$921 million) available for emergency assistance, including the funds allocated for catastrophic insurance. In Guerrero alone, damage to infrastructure is estimated at more than 1.9 billion pesos (US$146 million).

Speaking to reporters, Peña Nieto said the Congress "will absolutely have to adjust" the federal budget in light of the mounting damage but did not offer specific allocations to supplement the money available in FONDEN.

Beyond the casualties and the physical damage, the storm had other impacts on Mexico, including the extended suspension of classes in many areas. Education Secretary Emilio Chuayffet Chemor
said the storms and ensuing damage forced 43,000 schools in 10 states—Guerrero, Veracruz, Tamaulipas, Puebla, Hidalgo, Zacatecas, Colima, Sinaloa, Oaxaca, and Chihuahua—to suspend classes for several days.

There was also concern about the long-term impact on tourism, one of Mexico’s largest sources of revenue (SourceMex, July 3, 2013). Tropical Storm Manuel had an especially negative impact on the resort of Acapulco, where about 40,000 Mexican and foreign tourists were left stranded for several days. This prompted the SCT to set up special flights to help evacuate the majority of the tourists and to work overtime to repair the Autopista del Sol to allow another portion of the visitors to leave in their cars.

Poor planning, corruption worsened problems

In the aftermath of the storms, experts began to ask questions about the preparedness at the state and federal level as well as structural problems that had exacerbated the impact of the storms on several communities. The concerns include poor home construction, disregard for zoning regulations, and short-sighted urban-planning policies. For example, authorities in Guerrero state insist on using FONDEN resources for reconstructing homes in areas that have proven extremely vulnerable to storms instead of relocating those residents to safer areas, said columnist Pascal Beltrán del Río.

"Many of these vulnerable neighborhoods, which Hurricane Henriette flooded in August 2007—leaving six dead and 800 injured—suffered flood damage again this year," Beltrán del Río wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "Is the solution to continue to construct homes in dangerous areas ... even when you know that they will be destroyed again with the next storm?"

Beltrán del Rio said these problems are prevalent in cities like en Acapulco, Matamoros, Cancún, and Veracruz, communities that have a shortage of housing. "There is a need for 650,000 new homes every year, and authorities have not had the capacity to provide these homes."

Others agreed that authorities are going to have to engage in longer-term planning when responding to disasters. "It's not surprising. We develop in unbuildable areas, we build with garbage, and we design without planning," Jesus Silva-Herzog Marquez, a law professor at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

Columnist Rafael Maldonado criticized authorities for perpetuating the misconception that Mexico has the capacity to take preventative actions to mitigate the effects of the storm and take appropriate actions to repair the damages that do occur. "The government fed this fantasy when it announced once again that it would take the measures and allocate the resources necessary to help the population affected by the tragedy and guarantee that this type of disaster would never occur again," Maldonado wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Unomásuno.

Others were more succinct in their assessment of the situation, blaming the problem on corruption. "The flooding brought to the surface many things, including corruption and the lack of respect for the law," said Beltrán del Río.

"Natural phenomena are inevitable, but their consequences can be mitigated and minimized," columnist Jesús Cantú wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. "As we review history, there is
no evidence that this has occurred in Mexico. Year after year, the reports of damage are unending and frequent. The reasons are evident: negligence and incapacity or corruption of authorities."

Cantú said the government’s reaction and preparation for Tropical Storm Manuel was similar to what occurred with Hurricane Pauline in 1997, when ex-President Ernesto Zedillo’s administration came under severe criticism for not taking sufficient measures to deal with the impact of the storm (SourceMex, Oct. 22, 1997). "A quick comparison of what is occurring in Guerrero with what took place in 1997 provides evidence in both cases of the inefficiency of authorities," said the Proceso columnist. "While the statistics might be different, the impact and the consequences are practically the same."

Other concerns arose about the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities, including the expected emigration of much of the population either to the US or to the large metropolitan areas in Mexico. In a recent report, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) urged the Mexican government to take steps to help these vulnerable communities. "One factor that has to be included in any policy is migration, and an appropriate response is required," José Luis Samaniego, director of ECLAC’s sustainable development and human settlement’s division, said at a recent conference in Mexico City.

Other analysts see a silver lining in the storms if the government follows through with its promises of spending money for repairs and recovery in the areas affected by the storms. Marco Antonio Mares, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio, said millions of pesos would have to be invested in 20 states to repair and restore infrastructure damaged by the storm, which will help stimulate the economy. "Whether it’s prudence or the need to avoid a politically incorrect comment, authorities are not saying this out loud," Mares said.

"The reality is that there will be expenditures at a level that is not yet known, since the damage from the tropical storm and the hurricane affected such a large part of the country, especially 361 municipalities," added Mares.

Others agreed that expenditures would have to be extensive. "This is a great paradox, but the disaster the rain caused to urban infrastructure, roads, and housing in our country could come as welcome news for the economy … provided that the appropriate resources are allocated for reconstruction," columnist Enrique Quintana wrote in the Mexico City business daily El Financiero.

While there could be some economic benefits from a huge increase in expenditures on infrastructure, Quintana said budget allocations could not make up for other economic losses in the same way. "If the losses are, for example, in agricultural crops or reduced economic activity or a huge downturn in tourism, then there will be a huge decline in expected income," said the El Financiero columnist.

**Severe storms could be more frequent as a result of climate change**

Some observers said severe storms such as Manuel and Ingrid could come more frequently in the next few years because of the impact of global climate change. "It’s not that climate change is the cause of a single event," Mexican scientist and Nobel Prize laureate Mario Molina said at a forum on migration in Mexico City. "This event would have occurred anyway, but its intensity probably increased because of climate change,"
Molina said climate change could make weather even more uncertain in coming years. "What is most worrisome is that there could be even greater changes in a few decades," said the scientist.

Other observers offered a more certain and ominous forecast. "The possibility is very high that our country will experience weather conditions that include stronger winds and greater rainfall," said Beltrán del Río.

The Excélsior columnist acknowledged that Mexico has been at the forefront of the campaign to combat global climate change in recent years (SourceMex, Nov. 17, 2010, and April 25, 2012), but practically nothing has been done to help the millions of people who live in coastal communities that are most vulnerable to the impact of a warming planet.

And while Mexico has taken some steps to address climate change, the country remains at the top of the list of polluters at the global level. The World Resource Institute says that Mexico currently ranks 12th globally in the amount of greenhouse gasses released into the atmosphere.

There appears to be little effort to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, even though there have been recent increases in the use of alternative energy, particularly wind (SourceMex, Oct. 31, 2012). "In recent weeks, we have heard Environment Secretary Juan José Guerra Abud declare that the government’s proposed energy reform (SourceMex, Aug. 28, 2013) is a green reform that will promote the use of renewable energy, clean fuels, and reduce emissions of greenhouse gasses," said Mariana Becerra Pérez, an analyst for the think-tank Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias (CEEY).

"Some of the criticism of this law is that it centers on PEMEX," Becerra wrote in a guest opinion piece in El Financiero. "Nongovernmental organizations like Greenpeace and Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA) point out that the changes could actually have a negative impact on the environment. These organizations argue that the reform indicates a desire to continue exploiting hydrocarbons, when what we need is to reduce the use of fossil fuels and create incentives through tax breaks for the use of renewable energies." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 25, 2013, reported at 13.00 pesos per US$1.00.]

-- End --