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El Salvador Government Blamed for Conditions in January Earthquake

by LADB Staff

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The administration of President Francisco Flores is facing harsh criticism and the threat of lawsuits in the wake of the Jan. 13 tremor that caused extensive damage in the central and western portions of the country. The latest estimate by emergency authorities sets the number of deaths at 700, but unofficial estimates indicate it could go much higher. The quake destroyed 185,000 houses causing US\$1 billion in property damage. The estimated damage is equal to half of the government's annual budget. The quake was particularly damaging to hillside coffee fields which slid down into villages burying hundreds of houses. Fifteen percent of the nation's coffee mills were also damaged or destroyed.

As of Jan. 22, the government emergency committee (Comite de Emergencia Nacional, COEN) had calculated the number of quake victims at 1.16 million. Despite the devastation, government officials said there was little damage to the infrastructure and productive capacity of the nation.

Economy Minister Miguel Lacayo said, "There isn't going to be a negative impact on the economy, but there will be on the size of the debt that we are going to assume." However, some roads were blocked and many small businesses would need government help to recover, he said. Besides delivering a crippling blow to the coffee industry, the quake derailed Flores' long-term economic plans and emboldened critics of his recent dollarization of the monetary system (see NotiCen, 2000-12-24). The government and business leaders agreed that the economy was functioning normally.

Luis Mario Rodriguez, executive director of the business organization Asociacion Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP), said most businesses were operating and employment was 95% of normal. Treasury Minister Jose Luis Trigueros reassured foreign investors that the quake would not have a negative impact on productivity. Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) blame the government for the high death toll and property losses, and some victims are preparing lawsuits. Environmentalists say deforestation and government permits allowing construction on denuded hillsides contributed to the destruction. A

Ima Benitez of the Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA) called the government's actions a "flagrant violation of human rights." Arturo Harding, executive secretary of the Sistema Nacional para la Prevencion, Mitigacion y Atencion de Desastres, said many Central American towns were not built to code specifications and cannot withstand earthquakes of this magnitude. He said that even a relatively modern city like Managua "is totally malconstructed."

Environmentalist Mauricio Sermeno said, "The authorities here have been very permissive with the influential people who own construction companies." But government spokespersons and allies in

the Legislative Assembly called for unity in the face of disaster. Dagoberto Marroquin, Assembly deputy of the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN), said looking for revenge or assigning blame was "unpatriotic."

Quake survivors in Las Colinas district southwest of the capital have organized a residents committee (Comite Coordinador de Residentes de Las Colinas) and are preparing lawsuits against the government and construction companies. A landslide from the slopes of the Balsamo cordillera buried 300 houses in Las Colinas and other areas killing at least 400. The committee will ask for compensation from the government.

Prior complaints and warnings were ignored

The group's spokesman, Jorge Morales, said the committee intended to counter government claims that the damage was caused entirely by the forces of nature. He said that before Jan. 13, inhabitants of the area had repeatedly asked authorities not to build roads or develop residential areas on the hillsides. He said that local residents believed there would be some disaster after rains last year produced small landslides.

Ricardo Navarro, director of the Centro Salvadoreno de Tecnologia Apropriada (CESTA), said that two years ago he had criticized the government for allowing development on the hillsides and warned of a possible disaster. But rightists in the Legislative Assembly "never listened," he said. In 1999, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) threw out a lawsuit authorities of the Nueva San Salvador municipality had brought against a construction company for damage it caused to the flanks of El Balsamo. The court assessed the municipality a large fine for causing a loss of profits to the company.

The human rights office (Procuraduria para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (PDDH) is preparing to investigate possible irregularities in the distribution of emergency aid to areas hit by the earthquake. International aid promised Meanwhile, international organizations are promising aid. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has called a special meeting of the Consultative Group of donor countries for March 8 in Madrid to discuss reconstruction assistance. The IDB wants to see a government recovery plan and guarantees of transparency in the use of aid funds.

Miguel Martinez, the IDB regional manager in Central America, said that US\$500 million in IDB credits already in the pipeline could be redirected to aid recovery, but that the Legislative Assembly had yet to approve use of all the credits. "Our capacity to respond to the emergency depends greatly on the how swiftly the Assembly approves the pending loans," he said.

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