

Caribbean's poor hardest hit by Hurricane Georges

Jerry White
1 October 1998

Before Hurricane Georges reached Florida and the US Gulf Coast states this week its violent winds, rain and floods swept through the Caribbean islands. Those hit hardest by the storms were the poor who lack decent housing, medical care and social services. The death toll, particularly in the shantytowns and rural villages of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, rose even higher because government authorities did little to evacuate endangered areas, and were ill equipped to respond to the emergency. Their negligence, ineptitude and hostility to the poor were matched only by the disregard shown by US, British and French authorities who sent only token levels of aid.

The number of hurricane casualties is still rising throughout Caribbean, but 370 people are known dead. In the Dominican Republic there are 210 confirmed fatalities with thousands missing, and 550 injured. In Haiti 147 are known dead, with many more missing. Other victims include five in Cuba, six in Puerto Rico, three in St. Kitts and two in Antigua. The numbers are sure to rise as officials reach rural areas cut off by floods and mudslides, and without telephone communication.

Just hours before the storm reached the Dominican Republic last week, Civil Defense Director Elpidio Baez appeared on television and rejected US National Hurricane Center projections that Georges was headed towards the country and would hit Santo Domingo. Forty minutes later, as the storm engulfed the capital city, Baez appeared on TV again to order residents to evacuate their homes. He then gave the location of the government's hurricane shelters for the first time.

Later Baez justified his actions by saying that if he had announced the locations of the shelters earlier it would have been an 'open invitation' for squatters to invade and occupy public property. Baez also reportedly ordered deletions from official weather advisories and denounced as 'alarmists' Dominican meteorologists whose warnings were hurting the country's tourism industry.

Some 2,000 people are still missing from Mesopotamia, a town wedged between the Yaque del Sur and San Juan rivers, which was wiped out when Dominican officials, without evacuating villagers first, ordered the nearby Sabaneta Dam opened before it broke. According to a US government source mud came over the dam because design flaws prevented officials from releasing water quickly. The officials also waited too long to activate the dam's emergency release system.

The government says people were warned but did not listen to orders. Col. Jose de los Santos, who is in charge of recovery efforts, said, 'I personally gave the order to evacuate people, but they came at the military with rocks and sticks.' According to de los Santos the official count in all of San Juan de la Maguana, which includes Mesopotamia, is 28 dead and a 'few' buried by the overflowing dam. Throughout the province there is widespread belief that the government is responsible for thousands of deaths. An unnamed military officer said the government opened the dam at 3 a.m. in the morning when residents were sleeping.

Water damage has left many roads impassable, and many residents have been isolated in towns without water, telephone service or electricity. The Dominican government has only four Vietnam War-vintage helicopters that are unable to fly food and supplies to isolated villages. Nor does it have any chain saws to clear the thousands of downed trees blocking roads. Moreover, military officials fear retribution from angry workers and peasants.

More than 100,000 people remain homeless, and most of the country's crops, factories, power plants, bridges and hotels have been damaged. Dominican economist Felix Calvo wrote in an essay published Tuesday, 'It is as if a massive napalm attack had leveled the country.' He estimated that the total cost of the storm was \$6 billion, or about 40 percent of the country's \$15 billion gross

national product. The UN representative to the country, Paolo Oberti, added, 'This disaster is definitely going to worsen the situation. The poor will become miserable, and the miserable will become sub-miserable.'

President Leonel Fernández said the country would have to renegotiate its foreign debt in order to provide the basic necessities of life to the country's 8 million inhabitants. The US has mobilized minimal resources, providing only some medicine, food, water, equipment and search-and-rescue teams.

Damage in Haiti

Georges hit neighboring Haiti September 23 with 75mph winds and rainfall totals of up to 20 inches in the mountains. Highways and roads throughout the island were impassable because of flood runoff from the mountains that line Haiti's border with the Dominican Republic.

With a 65 percent poverty rate, Haiti is the poorest country in the Caribbean (which has an average 38 percent poverty rate) and the Western Hemisphere as a whole. Two-thirds of the country's 7.2 million people live in rural areas, and 80 percent of the rural population live in dire poverty. These areas were particularly hard hit by the hurricane. In the capital city of Port-au-Prince the poor were most heavily affected because they live in badly constructed shantytowns located in low-lying areas which were flooded.

At least 85 people died in Fond Verrettes, a small town in the hills east of Port-au-Prince, which was swept by flash floods and mudslides. Near the Dominican-Haitian border raging waters claimed the lives of Haitian workers who travel to the country to cut sugar cane and carry out other jobs. An unknown number of Haitians were killed near Jimani when their truck capsized in the river. Joaquin Recio, head of the town's defense council, said more than 50 people were riding in the truck and were washed away. Several bodies found downstream were buried in a mass grave.

Haiti has received only \$130,000 to help hurricane victims. The UN Development Program donated \$100,000, and Germany was providing \$95,000. The US has donated water, food and blankets.

In Cuba, civil defense officials evacuated nearly half a million people before and during the two days Georges hit. According to government officials Hurricane Georges' rain and winds destroyed 100 old houses in Havana and

1,000 elsewhere, while damaging more than 20,000 homes throughout the island. About 900 homes were under water. Major damage was also reported to the sugar cane, coffee, plantain and other crops in eastern Cuba. Sugar still accounts for nearly half of the nation's export revenue.

In the US territory of Puerto Rico, the hurricane caused at least \$2 billion in damage. About 30,000 of the island's 3.8 million residents were forced into shelters. In San Juan's working class Cantera district, low-lying streets were still under a foot of filthy, stagnant water nearly a week after the hurricane hit. Many residents in the city and throughout the country continue to be without electricity and water.

Last week, a young woman and three of her children died when a candle fell on the floor of their house, setting the dwelling on fire. The house had no electricity in the aftermath of Georges. At least three other deaths were blamed on the hurricane in Puerto Rico.

President Clinton declared a state of emergency and released \$39 million in aid to repair public housing, and divert other previously awarded housing aid for disaster relief. But the aid is a drop in the bucket for the tens of thousands in need.

One news account reported the case of 34-year-old Wanda Cortes. The last time a hurricane destroyed her home she received \$1,200 in government aid and built a new one with plywood in a squatter community in the northern city of Toa Baja. But after Georges wrecked her home Cortes learned she would receive no government aid because municipal officials said the squatter community was illegal.

The terrible destruction wrought by Hurricane Georges has further highlighted the social crisis throughout the Caribbean. After two decades of privatizing state-owned enterprises, establishing free trade zones and slashing social benefits and workers' living standards, the capitalist governments in the region are presiding over an ever-worsening economic disaster and a social explosion in the making.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact