At least 7,000 killed by Central American hurricane

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Hurricane Mitch has become the deadliest storm to hit Central America. There are 1,500 known dead from the six days of severe winds, torrential rains, flooding and mudslides in Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama and southern Mexico. However on Monday Central American officials estimated more than 7,000 people died. At its peak last Tuesday, the hurricane was the fourth-strongest Caribbean hurricane this century, with 180mph (305kph) winds.

On Sunday rescuers pulled hundreds of bodies from mud-entombed northern Nicaraguan villages and flood waters up to 50 feet deep in Honduras The two countries had the highest fatalities with at least 1,071 reported dead in Nicaragua and 313 in Honduras. Authorities believe the number of casualties will sharply increase as they reach rural areas cut off by flooding.

In Nicaragua four villages--El Porvenir, Versalles, Rolando Rodriguez and Santa Narcisa--were destroyed when an overflowing volcano crater caused a hillside to collapse. A Reuters journalist who flew to the area, 87 miles northwest of Managua, said a body--sometimes just an arm sticking out of the mud--could be seen every 30 feet in an area stretching 40 square miles near Casitas Volcano. Soldiers are burying victims at the sites of their deaths because of health dangers.

Only 92 of the estimated 2,000 residents of these villages were found alive, an army spokesman said. It was unclear whether any of the residents of the towns even had time to flee, or if they had been caught asleep in their homes by the avalanche.

Flood waters left a trail of devastation across Nicaragua, cutting off 172 villages and destroying at least 24 roads, 35 bridges and 5,066 homes, according to Managua authorities. Tens of thousands were homeless and without power or water across the country. The newspaper *El Nuevo Diario* said the hurricane was the worst natural disaster since the 1972 earthquake which killed 10,000 Nicaraguans.

In neighboring Honduras officials estimate 5,000 were killed. Mitch destroyed an estimated 60 percent of the country's infrastructure and left more than 300,000 people homeless. In the capital city of Tegucigalpa 20,000 lost their homes as the raging waters of the Choluteca River swept through entire neighborhoods, drowning at least 130 people and washing away cars, trucks, trees, power lines and livestock. 'The capital has been leveled,' said Mayor Cesar Castellanos, who was later killed in a helicopter crash while surveying the damage. 'Blocks and blocks of middle class and poor neighborhoods, shops--they have all been completely demolished.'

Officials were greatly concerned that the ravages of the storm could provoke social unrest. Eighty percent of the Honduran people live in extreme poverty and Tegucigalpa, a city of 1 million, is surrounded by shantytowns, or *colonias,* inhabited by thousands of impoverished workers and street children. Police arrested 250 people for looting wrecked supermarkets and stores in the capital city. They were also mobilized to suppress a bloody riot at a Tegucigalpa jail housing 3,500, including 2,500 inmates transferred from another jail after it became flooded.

'This is the worst disaster to befall Honduras in a hundred years,' said Vice President William Handal. 'This has been a harder blow to us than all the 100 military coups we've suffered in our history put together, harder than all the 36 civil wars we've gone through put together.'

Handel was particularly concerned about damage to export industries in the free trade zones. San Pedro

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Sula, which includes a modern international airport, plantations and textile factories that generate about 60 percent of the country's gross domestic product, was part of the 125-square-mile area under water as deep as 50 feet. The vice president said, 'Hurricane Fifi [which killed 3,000 Hondurans in 1974] was nothing compared to this. It took 12 to 14 years effort to overcome Fifi. This one will take 30 or 40 years.'

The president of Honduras told CNN's Spanish-language network the flooding was so extensive that 70 percent of the upcoming harvests had been lost.

El Salvador--which lost at least 144 people--declared a state of emergency Saturday, as did Guatemala, where 69 people died when floods swept away their homes. Mexico reported one hurricane-related death, but more were feared as the storm moved into southern Mexico on Monday. Mitch also claimed seven lives in Costa Rica and one in Panama.

The International Red Cross yesterday tripled its appeal for aid for victims of Hurricane Mitch, requesting $7.4 million. Hospitals and clinics, already understaffed and ill-equipped, have been stretched beyond capacity. Doctors said they were short of food, medicine, stretchers, surgical masks and gloves. Victims--many with crushed bones, bleeding gashes and eyes sealed shut by infections caused by muddy waters--face exacerbation of their injuries because medical personnel must handle them without stretchers or sterile equipment.

In Washington, President Clinton said the US government was only providing $2 million in food, medicine, water and other emergency relief supplies. This amount is particularly outrageous considering that over many decades the US has provided billions to prop up the region's military regimes and native elite and protect American business interests.

After the Nicaraguan Revolution in July 1979 and the overthrow of the US-backed Somoza dictatorship, Washington regularly sent $200 million a year to arm and train the so-called Contras, a guerrilla force which sought to topple the radical nationalist Sandinista regime. After the banning of further aid by the US Congress, President Reagan said everything had to be done to maintain the 'body and soul' of the Contras, who killed an estimated 20,000 Nicaraguan men, women and children, the vast majority from poor peasant families.

In the last decade Washington has spent millions more to aid the free market governments which have developed the region into a cheap labor haven for transnational corporations.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Georges, which ravaged the Caribbean in late September and early October, President Clinton responded similarly, providing only token levels of aid and medical supplies. Tens of thousands in the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Puerto Rico are still homeless and without utilities.

Two weeks ago hundreds of demonstrators in Santo Domingo and Navarrete clashed with police and soldiers to protest the lack of electricity, weeks after Hurricane Georges hit. While the government claims it has restored power to 80 percent of the island, demonstrators charge the Dominican Energy Corporation has neglected working class and poor neighborhoods.

See Also:
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