

Zedillo government spurns victims of Mexico storm and mud slides

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The devastation caused by the recent storms in Mexico reveals the state of social neglect in that country. Many hundreds have died, tens of thousands have been left homeless and hungry, and public health emergencies have been declared in many areas due to the danger of cholera and infectious diseases. Homes and fields have been turned into pools of mud by the worst downpour in 40 years. On October 15 another storm was developing in the Gulf of Mexico and was expected to continue the destruction. At least 253,000 have been left homeless in 9 out of the 31 Mexican states.

Yet what best characterizes the response of the Mexican government is indifference. In contrast to the popular outpouring of donations, the government of President Ernesto Zedillo has responded in a perfunctory manner. Everywhere there are reports of supplies hoarded for distribution to political supporters of the government, while aid is denied to areas believed to be in opposition to the ruling party. Offers of foreign assistance were turned down, with no reason given.

In Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco state, a demonstration by hundreds of people against the complacency of the authorities was savagely repressed. Many of the protesters were beaten by the police and jailed on October 11. The protesters dispute government claims that only 342 people have died in Tabasco. They point out that community and private organizations report at least 600 dead. Villahermosa is a city of half a million inhabitants. It has been under water for more than a week.

President Zedillo himself gave a measure of the contempt that the government has for the victims of the storm when confronted last week by a group of them in Veracruz. After one man interrupted him with demands for aid, Zedillo threatened: "Are you going to let me speak? I am the president of the Republic. If you say anything else I will make you pay." Moments later, Zedillo's bodyguards pushed through the crowd to escort

the man out. The object of Zedillo's anger was Leonardo de Luna Martínez, a retired teacher who demanded help and disputed Zedillo's assertion that the government had the situation under control.

In Michun, Puebla, 70 people died, including 20 children and their teacher who were killed when a hill collapsed on their school on October 6. A surviving teacher described how screams could be heard throughout the night coming from the ground. When the army finally arrived the next day, they dug up 17 of the small bodies. On the same night, the village of Zacatlan was swallowed whole by mud slides. At least 30 died.

In Hidalgo state alone, destroyed bridges and roads have left 100,000 people stranded. In Veracruz and Oaxaca 450,000 are without electricity.

The government reports that over 12,000 soldiers are being assigned to dig out the bodies and to help the survivors. This is a woefully inadequate figure when one considers the vast geographical area that must be covered. Furthermore there is a scarcity of equipment to dig people out. There are reports of volunteers using improvised tools, buckets, and even their bare hands. Many of the bodies being dug out are in an state of decomposition, creating the possibility of the spread of tetanus and other infectious diseases.

In Teziutla, Puebla, where a landslide killed at least 140 inhabitants, federal legislator Giudela Tapia accused Francisco Labastida of using government aid to further his political campaign. Labastida is running for the presidential nomination of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). According to the charges, donations from across Mexico are being waylaid to be repackaged with the logo of Labastida and the PRI. Aid is being channeled to the more populated areas, while thousands of rural Indians go hungry.

The PRI's main conservative rival, the National Action Party (PAN), is being accused of similar tactics. "The

politicians have lost all sense of morality," declared a human rights activist in Mexico City.

In Puebla, a peasant woman reported that survivors are without food and shelter living on a "sea of mud." The president of the Human Rights Commission of Puebla said that he personally witnessed how members of the Indian community of Mixum were being denied help because they are considered supporters of another opposition party, the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). He also reported that mayors of several Puebla cities have been hoarding the aid earmarked for flood victims to release it on the eve of upcoming primaries.

Similarly, in Veracruz state it was reported that the National Indian Institute is hoarding 50 tons of corn in one of its regional centers, allegedly to hand out during the November 7 PRI primaries.

Oaxaca state, one of the poorest in Mexico, was already reeling from the impact of the September 30 earthquake, which left many people homeless. While it can be argued that earthquakes cannot be predicted, the storm that is devastating the Mexican states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Puebla, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Hidalgo and Veracruz had been announced to everyone.

Satellites had been observing this tropical depression since it began. The amount of rain it could potentially dump, between 250 and 350 mm per day (10 to 14 inches), had been accurately predicted. Following an initial erratic trajectory, the storm settled over the states of Veracruz, Hidalgo, Tabasco and Oaxaca. There it rained over the Sierras, flooding the rivers that head to the Gulf of Mexico.

An official of the Mexican Federal Civil Protection Service, Jose Luis Alcudia, indicated in an interview to the Mexican magazine *Proceso* that the governors and other state officials knew about the approaching storm. "Everybody knew," said Alcudia. "We all knew which areas would be affected early on—the state agencies, radio operators, Red Cross, the Federal Police and the Department of Defense."

Alcudia made the dubious claim that in spite of all the warnings, poor people refused to leave their homes, only to be buried by mud slides. He blamed the resistance of the residents of Teziutlán, Puebla, to evacuation orders on their "lack of culture." On Thursday, October 7, 50 people were buried alive and killed by mud slides in that city.

Yet Alcudia has also admitted that poverty forces people to live in unsafe and isolated canyons and that states and cities do not enforce building codes and provide

safe sites for housing. Such is the level of distrust of government authorities that many of those that were warned of the impending storm greeted the government officials with arms in hand.

This is not the first time that poor people in the region have experienced floods that washed away their homes and killed canyon dwellers. Several winters ago, the city of Tijuana was also victim to killer floods. Last year Hurricane Mitch laid waste to much of Honduras and Nicaragua. The impact of the latest storm falls on a much more populated and broader area of Mexico and Central America, where hundreds are also confirmed dead. Making matters worse is the destruction of 240 thousand hectares (600,000 acres) of cropland and 10,000 animals in Puebla, Veracruz and Hidalgo, according to preliminary estimates.

The reality is that in each of these environmental disasters it is the poor who are most affected. About 61 million of Mexico's 98 million inhabitants live in poverty. In terms of housing, 2.5 million homes don't have drinking water; 4.5 million homes are in areas that lack adequate drainage. Almost a million families have no electricity. Close to a million and a half households lack adequate kitchens and 3.3 million homes do not have indoor plumbing.

In a society in which the richest 30 percent of the population receives 64 percent of total income, and the poorest 30 percent only 9 percent, hundreds of thousands have been marginalized and imperiled, forced to live in dangerous conditions and without the necessary means to survive such storms.

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