

Hurricane inflicts massive death toll in Guatemala

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The death toll from Hurricane Stan is expected to reach over 1,500 in Guatemala, as mudslides have buried entire villages following several days of torrential rains. The storm ravaged areas across northern Central America, with more than 100 other deaths reported from Mexico to Costa Rica.

As of Saturday, Guatemalan government officials had confirmed 530 dead and 337 missing, with close to 100,000 made homeless by the natural disaster.

Worst hit was the area around Santiago Atitlán, where several coffee-growing communities disappeared under a massive wall of mud, described as half a mile wide and up to 20 feet deep. These included the small Indigenous town of Panabaj and the neighboring community of Tzanchaj.

Guatemalan volunteer firefighters' spokesman Mario Cruz gave an estimate of 1,400 people dead. "There are no survivors here, it has already been 48 hours that they are dead," he said Saturday. Firefighters and local residents had worked round the clock trying to dig through the mud with shovels, axes and machetes in hope of rescuing survivors.

"Panabaj will no longer exist," said the town's mayor Diego Esquina. "We are asking that it be declared a cemetery. We are tired. We no longer know where to dig."

The mayor of Santiago Atitlán, about six miles from Panabaj, said that he estimated the death toll in the area at between 500 and 1,000 people.

Local villagers who escaped the disaster with their lives said that after several days of rain, the sides of two volcanoes gave way on Wednesday, sending down a wall of mud and debris that crushed homes, businesses and schools with many of the local residents trapped inside them.

"Thousands of people are still waiting for food and

water, stunned by the mud and water that has risen to their knees, while others are unable to stand on the ground as the water has reached the roofs of their homes where they wait desperately to be rescued," according to a report from the Guatemalan news service Cirigua. The report described terrified survivors of the mudslides in San Marcos "who still hear the shouts of people who were trapped between the mud and the rubble of a church in which they had sought refuge."

Meanwhile, the Guatemalan press has indicated that the devastation has unleashed a wave of price gouging, with businesses doubling the price of fuel, bottled water and other basic necessities in the affected areas.

The catastrophe is the worst to strike the impoverished region since Hurricane Mitch in 1998. That storm claimed some 10,000 lives throughout Central America, with 268 deaths in Guatemala.

In addition to the far greater death toll this time, the economic impact on Guatemala is also far more severe. According to a government estimate, 30 percent of the country's crops were wiped out by the storms, causing over \$400 million in losses. Large sections of processing industries have also been forced to shut down, resulting in widespread layoffs of workers.

Guatemalan President Oscar Berger declared a state of public disaster and appealed for international aid. In a public statement, he warned, "I imagine that we are going to have unpleasant surprises. There are many disappeared, many mudslides, and communities that are incommunicado."

The country's conservative government, representing the old landed oligarchy and the military, has come under fierce criticism over its handling of the disaster.

Berger's statement Tuesday, after posing for the cameras with impoverished storm evacuees, did not help matters: "For the moment the emergency does not

amount to much; the inhabitants of these areas are already used to this.”

The statement was indicative of the indifference of the country’s ruling elite to the suffering of the poor and signaled the complacency and slowness with which the government reacted to the disaster.

One of the wealthiest landowners in the country, Berger was accused of visiting only those areas where his own properties were affected, while ignoring the areas in the highlands, home to the country’s majority of Indigenous peasants, that were hardest hit.

The storm’s devastation will only deepen the crisis of a country that suffers among the most intense levels of poverty in Latin America.

The disaster also exposed the intense divisions that remain from Guatemala’s 36-year-old civil war in which successive US-backed dictatorships killed over 200,000 people. In Panabaj, villagers refused to allow in military units sent to join rescue and recovery operations. The town was the scene of a 1990 massacre in which unarmed protesters were gunned down by troops.



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