

Mexico: Aftermath of the Tabasco floods—another manmade “natural” disaster

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Tabasco and neighboring Chiapas state are still reeling from last month's floods in Mexico, which caused 19 confirmed deaths, caused hundreds to go missing and left hundreds of thousands homeless. Tabasco Governor Andres Granier declared that about four-fifths of Tabasco state was under water, estimating damage at \$5 billion, and warned that many evacuees will not be able to return for months.

A cold front and heavy rainfall which began on October 28 caused the Grijalva, La Sierra, Carrizal and Puxcatan rivers to break their banks, leaving over a million people subject to massive inundations—Granier said about half of the state's population was “in the water.” Crops across the entire state—the livelihood of more than a third of the population—were completely destroyed.

The Grijalva river, one of two large waterways encircling Villahermosa—the populous capital city of Tabasco—rose two meters above its critical level, sending water rushing into the city center. The state of Chiapas also suffered mass flooding affecting 11,000 people, damaging 5,000 houses and 300 kilometers of roads. On November 1, the General Coordination of Civil Defense of the Secretary of Government issued an emergency declaration for 22 municipalities in Chiapas.

The water treatment plant in Villahermosa—which serves 800,000 people—is inoperable. Moreover, health officials have announced that outbreaks of cholera, and tropical diseases such as the mosquito-borne dengue, are likely if the situation does not improve. On November 3, the United Nations reported that 424 doctors and health workers were deployed to more than 300 towns in the region to detect any outbreaks. Of 1,868 consultations performed as of November 3, the leading reasons for treatment were diarrhea in children, respiratory diseases, and mycosis resulting from contact with stagnant water.

Arriving November 1, President Felipe Calderon said the army, navy and federal police would lead rescue

efforts and protect property. Sporting the cap of a five-star general, Calderon oversaw the deployment of 13,000 soldiers, military vehicles and airplanes. Yet as his secretary of state, Humberto Mayans Canabal, gave a detailed description of situation to the public—focusing on the fact that Villahermosa had no potable drinking water—an exasperated President Calderon snapped at him, saying, “concentrate on the most urgent issues,” according to the Mexican daily *La Jornada*.

The president then reminded the victims of the flood to obey civilian and military orders. Although the local newspaper, *Tabasco Hoy*, reported only scattered looting, the president declared, “I will establish and authorize to the limit of my constitutional and legal powers the maximum authority of the secretaries of Defense and the Marines, so that they may preserve order and punish those that engage in looting.” Francisco Ramirez Acuna, the secretary of governance, later pointed out that anti-looting patrols had to be reconsidered because emergency sandbagging of the Grijalva River forced a change in plans.

The president also pledged to create a \$670 million reconstruction fund. But the *Los Angeles Times* reported that “previous efforts to create a modern flood-control infrastructure here succumbed to corruption, cronyism and mismanagement.” Although the current floods have been dubbed “the worst in 50 years” some 600 people died in another mass flooding in Tabasco as recently as 1999.

“The resources that were given from 1999 and 2000 for the matter of inundation were badly applied, badly handled,” Hugo Ireta, a member of the Santo Tomas ecological association, told the *Times*, adding, “The state government gave the concession for these works to people that had no idea of what was needed, that never did studies.” George Grayson, a professor of comparative politics at the College of William & Mary in Virginia,

told the *Times* that Tabasco has had “a series of extremely corrupt governors,” including Roberto Madrazo, accused of massive campaign finance violations in 1994, but never prosecuted. Madrazo finished third in Mexico’s 2006 presidential race and was recently in the news again over allegations that he had cheated to win the “men’s 55-and-over” category of the Berlin Marathon.

The Mexican Oil Company Pemex confirmed that it had contributed nearly two billion pesos (approximately US\$200 million) to flood prevention efforts in 1999. Pemex said the money was donated to build up infrastructure, protect against floods and construct housing for those living in the flood plain. Nonetheless, Pemex declared that it could find no evidence that the money was ever applied to these projects.

One non-governmental organization, the Saint Tomas Association, also said that there was every indication that the money went elsewhere.

“The group’s investigators say they have found proof that flood abatement money was used to pay off contractors who never completed jobs, as well as to fill the gasoline tanks of private vehicles and to buy large quantities of cigarettes, pastries and other sweets,” the *Washington Post* reported.

One of the infrastructure projects due for improvement was a network of dams which comprise a large-scale system of hydroelectric production. Las Penitas dam, as part of the system, can add 2,000 cubic meters per second to the network of rivers snaking through Tabasco as part of its production process. This system exacerbates Tabasco’s natural risk of flooding, and clearly requires a careful policy for flood prevention. Such a policy was not in place.

La Jornada reported that Las Penitas may have accumulated dangerous quantities of water and then quickly released it into the rivers. This, in conjunction with heavy rainfall, would have significantly contributed to the bursting of the river banks. Carmen Aristegui, an anchor woman for CNN en Español, commented, “without a doubt they quickly released more water than they should have.”

Tabasco Governor Granier said that the opening of the Las Penitas dam “contributed enormously” to the flooding and demanded that the federal government implement a comprehensive plan for the management of the hydroelectric projects in Tabasco instead of the piecemeal management that has existed to date. He said that had the federal government provided sufficient resources for the project, “there would have been

damages, but not the catastrophe we are living through.... We want Penitas to operate and generate energy and wealth for Mexico, but in a way that we can live with.”

Salvano Briceno, director of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, reported that the floods in Tabasco could have been avoided in many different ways, all of them economically viable and ultimately cheaper than the cost of the current disaster. His report stressed that “floods are among the most predictable, expected and announced natural hazards,” noting as well that the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report predicted that “more frequent and intense tropical cyclones and hurricanes will occur because of climate change, bringing more flooding with them.”

For the last 25 years, Tabasco has enjoyed a larger budget than any other state in Mexico. Moreover, the federal government of Mexico has expended millions over the last year in efforts to militarize the nation in the long-term interests of its own national bourgeois and US imperialism, under the guise of a “war on drugs.” Finally, the US announced it will provide Mexico with \$1.4 billion in military aid over the next three years, but the US Embassy in Mexico City said it would donate a paltry \$300,000 to help victims of the Tabasco floods.

Although elemental, the destruction of Tabasco was not really a natural disaster. Resources, scientific analysis and technology are readily available to deal with such events. Like the tsunami that ravaged Sri Lanka and the hurricane that swamped New Orleans, the flooding of Tabasco could have been successfully mitigated with minimal loss of life and resources. Instead, the broad interests of society were subordinated, once again, to the capitalist elite’s shortsighted, anarchic pursuit of profits, with tragic results.



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