

Intense storms cause death, destruction in Mexico

Rafael Azul
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Two storms are having a widespread impact across Mexico, causing floods and destruction. The states most affected are those along the Pacific coast and include Guerrero, Michacán, Sinaloa, and Jalisco. Veracruz and Tamaulipas, on Mexico's eastern shores, have also been impacted. The storms have been the most intense in written Mexican history.

The response to this historic disaster by the government of president Enrique Peña Nieto has been slow and is being condemned for its indifference.

On Thursday, tropical storm "Manuel" struck the state of Sinaloa, on the country's Pacific northwest, 900 miles north of Acapulco, in Guerrero state, where the storm hit land a week ago with 60-mile-an-hour hurricane force winds.

"Ingrid," a second hurricane, affected Veracruz state, on Mexico's Caribbean coast. While Ingrid stopped being a threat last Tuesday, Manuel is continuing its path along the Pacific coast as a tropical storm. In Sinaloa, hundreds of communities are isolated due to the flooding of dozens of rivers and streams.

In all, 22 states have been affected by torrential rain, floods and mudslides. Hundreds of thousands have suffered damage from the storms. Ninety-eight have died; tens of thousands have been evacuated. Roads have been washed out, making it difficult to deliver aid to the victims. Airport runways have been buried in mud.

The worst damage so far is being reported in the impoverished state of Guerrero. As with hurricanes Sandy and Katrina in the United States, this natural disaster exposes a deep social divide in Mexico.

While the government has gone all out to help stranded tourists in Acapulco, offering free hotel space and airfares, no such attention has been given to the rest of Guerrero state, one of Mexico's poorest, where 68

people disappeared from one town alone.

Impoverished slum communities, a stone's throw from Acapulco's luxury hotels, are still isolated with no government help six days after the storm hit, partially buried in mud and without electricity or potable water. Some 120 municipalities in the state are facing a total lack of potable water. Outside of Acapulco, help from the federal government is inadequate.

On Thursday, human rights activists warned of impending famine across the region, particularly in Indian communities.

The Mexico City newsweekly *Proceso* interviewed Abel Barrera, director of the La Montaña-Tlachinollan Human Rights Center, and Leopoldo Soberanis Hernández, from the Guerrero Unido Alliance for Human Rights, who described the disinterest of federal authorities toward some of the most affected areas in the state. A national rescue plan, known as DN III, that provides for the mobilization of army and navy forces in cases of natural disasters, is not being applied in rural areas, said Barrera.

Soberanis indicated that troops are not being assigned to any tasks. "The troops have handed out not one piece of candy," said Soberanis. "They are not opening up roads to end the isolation," he added. This, despite "a permanent presence of armed forces in Guerrero, as an occupying force"—to stifle social unrest.

He indicated that Tlapa de Comonfort, the largest population center in this region, is located near an army base, and that the 700 troops there have been restricted to the base, adding that many soldiers have been abandoned: "Students from the National Teachers College told us that when they were out distributing food in the town of Malinaltepec, they were approached by 15 to 20 soldiers who asked why it was that they too

had been left with no food.”

Tlapa is now undergoing serious shortages of food and fuel, reported the activists. In the region of Costa Grande, some 500,000 are facing famine. Soberanis also described price gouging across the region. “A dozen eggs, that used to sell for 34 pesos, now is being sold at 150. ... Merchants are taking advantage of the fact that the government is neither sending nor distributing anything.”

They also spoke of the general awareness that the roads and other infrastructure connecting these communities with each other and with the rest of the country were vulnerable to natural disasters, but that the necessary investment in upgrades and maintenance never took place.

The activists issued a call for popular solidarity and help for rural Guerrero. “Guerrero is not just Acapulco,” said Soberanis.

Tensions are rising; an Acapulco supermarket was looted last Tuesday and is now under army protection.

Two days later, in response to an ad offering clean-up jobs at a Costco store, thousands of people flocked to Acapulco. Most were left empty handed; less than 100 jobs were available. “If they have no work for us, give us supplies, or else,” declared a woman that had been turned away. A few hours later, a contingent of Mexican marines arrived with 600 modest care packages—each with four cans of tuna, 1 kilo of beans, 1 kilo of rice, canned chili, and one liter of water— for one thousand people.

The marines promised more aid delivered to the surrounding communities, on condition that people stay out of Acapulco.

A third storm now appears to be developing in the Caribbean, south of the Gulf of Mexico, that has a 70 percent chance of becoming a hurricane.



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