

Twenty-three dead, thousands homeless due to lack of infrastructure as floods and mudslides strike Lima, Peru

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Several districts of Lima, Peru, have been inundated with water, mud and stones from the overflow of the Jauycoloro River, leaving 23 dead and thousands without homes. Heavy rains are continuing, and flooding may reach the district where the government center is located.

On February 1, the government declared a 60-day state of emergency in five departments: Tumbes, Piura and Lambayeque along the north coast and Loreto and Ucayali in the eastern Amazon basin.

By February 3, the mud slides and floods had destroyed 7,000 homes and ruined 400 kilometers of roads. Half a million people have been affected and as of last week, the cost was estimated at 120 million soles (US\$36 million). This figure is rising each day.

Mudslides and floods are common across large portions of the heavily mountainous and wet country, yet the government has done practically nothing to protect poor and working class districts from the impact of these natural disasters. The impoverished people who have drowned in the floodwaters and who have been buried alive by mud are victims not only of natural disaster, but of the capitalist system.

Prime Minister Fernando Zavala replied to the disaster with a hollow apology: “The government recognizes that the country was not prepared to confront the mudslides.”

Cement block barriers constructed along the sides of the Jauycoloro River stood from half a meter to less than 2 meters tall. These heights, given the frequency of the river overflow (1998, 2012, 2015, and 2016) proved inadequate. This year alone, the Jauycoloro River swelled by more than 2 meters in some sectors. Zavala was aware of this information when he made his

statement.

Years of wear from mudslides have cut paths from the tops of mountains into many of Lima’s poorer neighborhoods. As a result, mud, stones, and large boulders have been rolling down the hillsides into the poor neighborhoods, destroying the houses that stood in the way.

Poor and working class neighbors are the first to help those in distress, bringing sacks of sand and car tires to stop the rising waters. The government did not respond immediately, only later promising to deliver aid for reconstruction.

The main highways connecting Lima to the fruit, timber, coffee and minerals-rich central Andes and Amazon Region are covered with mud and stones, while many bridges, including the heavily used “Ramilro Priale” bridge, were destroyed by the floods. The government has promised to build a temporary bridge, but this will take about a week to complete.

Maps from the Peruvian institute of Geology, Mining, and Metallurgy (INGEMMET) show that several of the flooded areas were known to be prone to flooding. According to INGEMMET maps, the Rimac River area is one of the coast valleys most affected by natural disasters, particularly floods. Maps show Lima being unprepared for floods and landslides that are known to cause disastrous damage.

Those in the heavily indigenous rural provinces are also devastated by the recent floods and mudslides. In these provinces, the heavy Andean rains also caused extensive damage. In the northern departments of Tumbes, Piura, and Lambayeque, thousands of arable hectares have been destroyed. Lambayeque is one of the departments most damaged by the torrential rains.

All streets of the province capital, Chiclayo, have been inundated. As a preventive measure, electric service was suspended. In Chosica, 30 kilometers east of Lima, four were dead and six disappeared with damage costs estimated at US\$12 million. In Huancavelica, 60 percent of the department is affected. In Chincha, a mudslide blocked the Panamericana South Highway.

After several weeks of crop losses and a lack of drinking water, people are beginning to get sick. It is reported that high infection rates are spreading in rural Peru. The south of Ica alone has reported 28 cases of dengue, a disease propagated by mosquitos.

The crisis produced by the floods and mudslides reveal as fraudulent Peru's claim to be a healthy economy with a high growth rate. This is now changing, with the rating agency Moody's revising its forecast Growth for Peru from 4.5 percent to 3.7 percent due to the effect of the Odebrecht corruption scandal involving the last four presidents—Alejandro Toledo, Alan Garcia, Ollanta Humala and current president, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (see: Top Peruvian politicians implicated in Brazil's "Lava Jato" corruption scandal).

On January 17, seven miners died buried in a mudslide that flooded an informal mine running in violation of the non-enforced safety code. The owners are responsible for not taking precautions to close the entrance and exit to the mine when it was abandoned months before (see: Rescue attempts abandoned for seven buried Peruvian miners).

The mismanagement of the flood disaster comes as Kuczynski faces a growing crisis of legitimacy. After the mine disaster, last month's protests over highway toll hikes, and the growing Odebrecht scandal, his poll numbers are falling. The latest poll by Datum gave Kuczynski a 41 percent approval, while his approval rating stood at 63 percent in November. This marks a drop of 22 percent in less than three months.



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