

Colombian government ignores warnings, mudslide kills hundreds

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Late Friday night and Saturday morning, sudden floods and a deafening avalanche swept through entire neighborhoods in the Colombian city of Mocoa, located in the impoverished southern department of Putumayo. The devastating mudslides left hundreds of casualties, while thousands of families lost their homes and belongings. As of Monday, the Red Cross had announced 254 dead, 43 of them children, hundreds more injured and no official number of missing persons.

Nine months ago, the Colombian Geologic Service had warned the Putumayo local government about the need to relocate entire neighborhoods, which had been recently urbanized on former riverbeds and areas at risk of landslides. The deaths caused by the disaster in Mocoa, as well as the floods in Peru that killed over 100 people, and those in Ecuador that left 21 dead, are entirely preventable. They are the product of the capitalist system. Such disastrous weather events are expected to grow in frequency as the effects of global warming wreak havoc on the poorest parts of the world.

Three days after the deluge, the desperation of many had not receded as they continue to check the lists outside of the makeshift morgue and to tirelessly dig into the mud and rubble to find those missing. The government has announced that an insulting \$87 monthly stipend for three months will be provided to families that have lost their homes, even though officials have said that reconstruction efforts will take at least one year.

Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos visited the stricken area and declared a “state of emergency.” In spite of his remarks and the announcements that potable water tankers, food, and mattresses were being sent, those at the shelters complain that these are still in short supply. Half of the city still has no electricity.

The small hospital at Mocoa collapsed immediately, unable to attend the numerous victims, and all fresh water sources were destroyed, leading the Putumayo governor to declare a “sanitary emergency” on Saturday.

“There is no physical, logistical, or medical infrastructure to attend the injured from this tragedy, but we are doing as much as we can with whatever is available,” an anesthesiologist told *El Espectador*.

Many from nearby towns rushed in to help with the search-and-rescue efforts on Saturday and Sunday. Initially, the deployment of rescue teams, equipment and aid depended on the local airport 40 minutes away since all of the roads crossing the mountains into the city were blocked by landslides.

The Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology, and Environmental Studies reported that almost 129mm of rain fell on Mocoa in just three hours on Friday night, which represents about 30 percent of the average rainfall for the entire month. Three rivers that cross the city overflowed, producing landslides and flash floods that destroyed 17 neighborhoods, affecting several thousand of the 42,000 residents of the city.

“Many of the neighborhoods close to the rivers have almost disappeared,” commented the mayor, José Antonio Castro.

The National University has already emitted a warning that, out of the 2,440 urban municipalities, 385 are at risk of “landslides and the damming of floodwaters.” Other meteorologists have cautioned that the rainy season continues to intensify until May.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that as far back as 1989, the Agricultural Ministry reported that a disaster of such proportions was likely unless efforts “were taken to reinforce the riverbanks, channel water away from the town and restore some of the forest.”

Government officials, on their part, have blamed the lack of a territorial ordinance plan for the region, but only 3 percent of the country has a functioning plan.

This is not the first time the Colombian ruling class has ignored pleas by scientists and experts to prevent such a disaster. In the Colombian town of Armero, 25,000 people died in 1985 from volcanically induced mudflows, even though volcanologists had called for the evacuation of the town at least two months before.

After enormous floods during La Niña event in 2011-12, the Santos administration acknowledged that droughts and major rain events had become more extreme than in the last 50 years, and that Colombia will be one of the countries most affected by climate change. Nonetheless, as extreme weather events continue, no serious measures have been taken to protect vulnerable communities.

The government's 2014-18 Strategic Plan for the Putumayo Department recognized the dire infrastructural conditions. They found that there is a 72.6 percent housing deficit, while 63.7 percent of households were in precarious conditions, compared to a 25.8 percent national average.

Other infrastructure is urgently lacking. For instance, only 44 percent of the region has a sewage system compared to 82 percent for Colombia and 97.1 percent for Latin America. In spite of this, the strategic plan dedicates most resources to facilitate the fast extraction of resources from the region and spends virtually nothing on safer housing.

More than half of Putumayo's production comes from mining and crude oil, while illegal coca leaf farming is rampant and has engulfed the region in decades-long warfare between drug cartels, paramilitary units, and guerrilla groups.

While the 2014 plan pledged the construction of a new hospital in Mocoa, it was never built. Seeking to cover up this important factor, the health minister, Alejandro Gaviria Uribe, announced on Sunday that the construction of the new hospital will be accelerated.

Similar figures for the region—including the lack of availability of middle or higher education, illiteracy, stunted growth from malnutrition, infant mortality and the homicide rate—are much higher than the already alarming national averages. Over 90 percent of the department's working age population is either unemployed or working informally. According to 2013

official government data, the index of multidimensional poverty is 79 percent for the Putumayo department and 53 percent for the city of Mocoa.

The Attorney General's office has sent 45 prosecutors and forensic specialists to the affected area to seek who to blame in order to appease the growing social indignation and disguise the ruling class's indifference to such suffering.



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