

Death toll rises as volcanic eruption buries entire towns in Guatemala

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The National Coordinator for the Reduction of Disasters (CONRED) of Guatemala confirmed that at least 62 people have died after a volcanic eruption Sunday created pyroclastic flows that wiped out entire communities.

The preliminary numbers include 300 injured, 2 million affected, and 3,300 evacuated, with about 1,000 in shelters. There is still an unknown number of missing, and the death toll is expected to rise dramatically.

On Sunday, a survivor leaving the “furnace” told *El Periodico*, “there are way too many buried, a multitude of dead, countless people are dead.”

On Sunday night, at a press conference with ministers and CONRED, President Jimmy Morales declared shamelessly: “Our budget does not allow us to allocate a cent to this emergency. I’m ashamed to say this again, but the Budget Act does not allow us to count a single cent for emergencies.” The Finance Ministry announced it could scrape together about \$25 million.

Located 20 miles northwest of the capital, Guatemala City, and 12 miles from Antigua, the Fuego volcano, one of the most active in Central America, had long given repeated and increasingly alarming warnings, according to residents, but no evacuation orders were made in time.

This neglect has produced yet another devastating social crime by the capitalist ruling class. It is similar to those that led to 5,000 deaths in Puerto Rico from Hurricane María, the 370 dead from last year’s earthquake in Central Mexico, the Grenfell fire in London, the poisoning of children and workers in Flint, Michigan and virtually all the devastating and unnecessary mass deaths from natural disasters and “accidents” under capitalism.

In contrast to the criminal indifference and neglect of the government and the ruling class, the immediate aftermath of Fuego’s first eruption saw the mobilization of the population across Guatemala at collection points to send food, diapers, clothes, blankets and other aid, while local inhabitants have prepared meals for rescue teams. There have been breathtaking scenes of bravery by ill-equipped rescuers, including fire fighters, paramedics, rank-and-file

military and police who decided among themselves to penetrate deeply into unstable and buried areas amid scorching temperatures, with several being injured and at least one losing his life, but helping evacuate hundreds more as pyroclastic flows continued.

The US Geological Survey indicates that these flows, composed of molten rock, mud and other volcanic materials, move at speeds faster than 50 mph, compared to running-pace lava flows. Temperatures can reach 700 degrees Celsius (1,300 degrees Fahrenheit), leaving low probabilities of survival for anyone caught unawares in a region where most people have no vehicles and the roads are in poor condition.

Dr. Matthew Watson, a volcanologist at the University of Bristol, who has studied the Fuego volcano for 20 years, told the *Independent*: “This volcano is surrounded by real rural poverty, and evacuation is typically done on foot or in vehicles that take a long time to get anywhere.”

Older residents in Alotenango accompanying the families of victims said to journalists that they had never witnessed a disaster of such magnitude, recalling that about 40 years ago an eruption also wiped out crops and towns, but the population was able to escape in time.

The first eruption happened at 11:00 a.m., a second one occurred at 4:00 p.m. and a third one at 8:00 a.m. on Monday. Almost immediately after the state’s volcanological institute, INSIVUMEH, had announced that the second eruption had ended, the third one began, forcing rescuers, journalists and more inhabitants to evacuate in panic. Rescuers and local reporters broke into tears after finding the charred bodies of entire families burned alive.

In the Chimaltenango Department to the north, at least six communities are still entirely cut off due to avalanches and a river that has overflowed its banks.

The column of ashes ascending from Fuego on Sunday reached about 8,000 feet above the peak of the volcano, which is 12,000 feet above sea level. Ash spread across the area, coating the capital, Guatemala City, Escuintla and Quetzaltenango, and reaching most of the country’s

territory. The Aurora International airport in Guatemala City was forced to suspend operations. Adding to the anxiety, at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, a 5.2 magnitude tremor hit the Pacific coast, rocking the entire region around the volcano.

Several smaller but significant eruptions occurred last year, with the government's CONRED limiting their warnings for tourists not to camp in the plateau area and for the leaders of communities to stay in contact with emergency agencies.

The INSIVUMEH had reported "strong explosions" in August and November 2017 that sent ashes to nearby towns, while eruptions had been getting stronger. On February 1 of this year, the largest explosion in six years led to the evacuation of 2,880 inhabitants, given lava and pyroclastic flows down the Seca, Cenizas, Las Lajas and Honda ravines, the same ones carrying the deadly flows on Sunday and Monday. The Las Lajas and Honda ravines are directed toward the east and southeast, where most residents were left trapped in the towns of San Miguel Los Lotes, El Rodeo and Escuintla.

As recently as May 5, more than 300 people were evacuated due to a smaller eruption. The Smithsonian Institution's Global Volcanism Program also reports large and recent explosions with pyroclastic flows down the same known ravines on May 17, April 14-17, April 7-10, February 27-28 and February 7-13.

In 2012, about 10,000 people were evacuated due to heightened activity in the volcano. Even though, as Dr. Watson notes, the last eruption had "gone up an order of magnitude in terms of scale," and in spite of the large tourist sector and productive agriculture in the area, there was no justification for thousands of residents in the most vulnerable areas downstream of the known pyroclastic channels to not have been resettled.

The areas vulnerable to lava and pyroclastic flows, avalanches and floods are well known from decades of documentation. With the presence of 32 active volcanoes in the country, Guatemala's preparations for these disasters, especially close to the largest cities, should include emergency agencies constantly on alert and fully equipped. This is far from the case.

The disaster caused by the Fuego volcano eruption is an extension of the social catastrophe that characterizes Guatemalan society. It is the most unequal country, in terms of the Gini index, in the most unequal region of the world. The last figures available for 2014 from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean show that the official poverty rate stands at 60 percent, including 71 percent of the mostly indigenous rural population, while 23.4 percent live under conditions of extreme poverty. All of these figures have increased sharply since the 2008 global

capitalist financial meltdown.

Access to health care, pensions and a livable income is denied to the vast majority of the population. In 2017, 111 children under the age of five died from starvation in Guatemala, while 46.5 percent of all infants suffer from chronic malnutrition. Meanwhile, Guatemala is expected to pay \$1.8 billion in interest payments to bondholders this year, while the ministry of defense is asking for a \$531 million budget. According to Oxfam, more than 260 people have more than \$30 million in assets, while the Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies (ICEFI) calculates that the top 1 percent in the country hoards 42 percent of the national income.

Such inequality and desperate economic conditions are the product of more than a century of super-exploitation and domination by US imperialism. While workers and peasants have held mass mobilizations against rampant corruption in recent years, including those that resulted in the resignation and jailing of president Otto Pérez Molina in 2014, these social conditions and the intensifying exploitation of the working class persist, alongside official corruption and austerity, as the entire Guatemalan ruling class continues enriching itself and its financiers on Wall Street and the City of London.

The social resources were available to prevent the deaths, destruction and suffering produced by the Fuego volcano's eruption, and the resources exist to help the survivors get on their feet, to improve the social infrastructure across the country and to satisfy the urgent social needs of the entire population, including quality housing, food, education, and health care.

The only way for the working class and the exploited masses in Guatemala to secure their social rights is by undertaking a struggle against capitalism, in unity with workers throughout the hemisphere and internationally, to expropriate the enormous wealth amassed by the ruling elite and the transnational corporations.



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