Guatemalan government ignored calls for evacuation ahead of deadly Fuego volcano eruption

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8 June 2018

The death toll, together with the number of injured and missing, continues to mount amid new eruptions of the Fuego volcano in western Guatemala. The National Coordinator for the Reduction of Disasters (CONRED) has confirmed that at least 196 people are missing and 101 have died, with only a small fraction of them identified, since most were burned alive by the scorching pyroclastic flows released by the eruptions that began on Sunday.

Search operations were suspended on Thursday due to rains raising the danger of avalanches and continued flows of scorching volcanic materials containing explosive gases. Eruptions at the Fuego volcano have not stopped, while the Santiaguito volcano, located a few miles from the city of Quetzaltenango, has been showing signs of increased activity.

The criminal negligence by government officials ahead of the potential disaster and the ruling class's indifference to the suffering and mass deaths of workers and peasants have become increasingly clear. The lack of adequate preparations and response, however, are, more fundamentally, the result of the social ruin caused by decades of austerity and right-wing policies imposed to defend the interests of the ruling capitalist class in Guatemala and, above all, US imperialism.

In a hearing before Guatemala's Congress on Wednesday, the heads of the volcanic institute INSIVUMEH and CONRED blamed each other for the disaster. CONRED officials claim that INSIVUMEH's bulletins about the volcanic activity "said nothing" to warn them.

In reality, significant and increasingly explosive eruptions and pyroclastic flows were documented during the previous year, but they were virtually ignored by the government, which decided not to resettle communities in the path of known channels of volcanic materials.

Moreover, at 6:00 a.m. on Sunday, INSIVUMEH issued a bulletin warning that an eruption of pyroclastic flows was beginning that could reach all known ravines down the volcano. It also noted "constant noises similar to a train locomotive" and recommended that CONRED implement the level of alert it considered "necessary." Another bulletin at 10:05 a.m. warned that the eruption "can generate pyroclastic flows along any ravine around the Fuego volcano, so it's *inadmissible to stay within or near these due to the eruption*."

At 11:00 a.m. CONRED tweeted: "For now, evacuations are not necessary."

Hora Informativa interviewed a man who was working on his plot of corn when his six sons and daughters between the ages of four and 28 were all caught by the pyroclastic flows. He complained that CONRED did nothing to alert them. "CONRED got there, but to film its videos and not to prepare people and help them evacuate. What they say is a pure lie. They alerted us only when the lava was already on its way."

Alicia García, 52, a grandmother who lived in San Miguel Los Lotes, told *Nómada* that the volcano "was thundering a lot" since earlier Sunday. CONRED representatives even visited her community that morning to take pictures of the volcano and allay concerns: "So, we didn't have to leave, and we just had to lock ourselves in our houses, that is what they told us."

When the pyroclastic flows reached her town at about 3:00 p.m., she was caught unawares. The stream of molten rocks burned her legs, but she was able to find refuge at her neighbor's house with three small children who had all suffered burns as well. Shortly after, she relates, her son and firemen were able to rescue them.

"We are poor, my husband and son are construction workers, my daughter-in-law and I are housewives. They work to be able to eat, not to get possessions, but now we don't have anything anymore," Alicia commented holding back her tears.

The ill-preparedness and lack of equipment for the rescue teams were reflected in the injuring of dozens of rescuers.

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One CONRED rescuer died while seeking to save three trapped girls from new pyroclastic flows, while two volunteer firemen disappeared during the search efforts.

The monitoring of the volcano's activity was sufficient to have provided serious and timely warnings about the coming disaster; however, the scientific equipment available was inadequate to provide more precise measurements, according to the INSIVUMEH. The agency had been requesting that the government set up four more seismographic stations, as the two existing ones were not enough to monitor the Fuego volcano. Now, they are demanding $22 million for new equipment to better monitor all the active volcanoes in the country.

Legislators of the largest opposition party, National Unity of Hope (UNE), called on the head of CONRED, Sergio Cabañas, to resign and for the Public Ministry to prepare criminal charges. The Congress as a whole, however, had been ignoring a bill introduced last year by CONRED to improve its readiness for such disasters. Moreover, as President Jimmy Morales made clear on Sunday, the government's austerity budget, which he proposed and the Congress approved, failed to include "a single cent for emergencies."

It also took more than four days for the Foreign Ministry to establish accounts to receive aid collected from abroad, while 15 tons of aid from El Salvador were still sitting Thursday in customs. Angry condemnations of the criminal official response have come to dominate social media, with some users contrasting this indifference to the ministry's eagerness to lick the boots of US imperialism by moving its embassy to Jerusalem, only two days after Washington made the same provocative move.

On Monday, President Morales visited shelters in Alotenango and asked the survivors for "patience." Then, blaming the impoverished population for the calamity, he declared, "We call on all people who live in at-risk areas to help us prevent these types of situations. There are too many homes near rivers, ravines, foothills…"

A woman from San Miguel Los Lotes, Carmen Corado, speaking to *Infobae*, responded to Morales: "If there is no help, one has to stay put. Where are we supposed to go?"

In fact, in a country with 17 million people, in which more than 80 percent of income earners don't make enough to keep an average family out of poverty, there is a deficit of 1.5 million homes. Due to this extreme poverty and lack of housing, hundreds living in precarious settlements die each year from landslides and floods. These realities have continued to worsen even after the country and the world were shaken by the death of 300 people at the El Cambray II settlement in 2015.

Such life-threatening economic conditions, including levels of homicidal violence three times what the UN considers an "epidemic," have led to a 661 percent increase in the number of Guatemalans seeking asylum and refuge in the US and Mexico since 2012.

Those who attempt the journey have been met with persecution and mass deportations by the Mexican and US authorities. Washington has deployed National Guard troops to the border, implemented the separation of children from their undocumented immigrant parents, condoned sexual abuse and violence against detained child immigrants, carried out mass deportation trials and other egregious attacks against refugees.

On top of the exploitation of Guatemala's natural resources and workforce by imperialism, and the plundering of the country's finances by Wall Street, Washington has demanded further austerity to pay for Guatemala's participation in US military and border security operations. In February, Morales announced that 5,000 soldiers and police had been trained in Colombia and that the government is buying warships for border security.

Since 2006, Washington has been exerting greater pressures on the Guatemalan ruling class by sponsoring the "anti-impunity" and "anti-corruption" commission CICIG and virtually controlling the Public Ministry to pursue select corruption cases against top business and political figures tied to the ruling party, the National Convergence Front (FCN), including members of Morales' own family.

Calamities such as the Fuego volcano eruption, the frequent landslides and the death of 41 girls in a fire at a "safe home" last year have exposed the extreme levels of inequality in the country and the urgent social needs of the majority of the population. However, the Guatemalan ruling class has responded with further austerity measures, while seeking to contain social anger by scapegoating a handful of officials who showed particular negligence or were tied to corruption allegations.

The UNE and the rest of the political "opposition" have limited their appeals to fraudulent US-backed movements such as the "Citizen's Front against Corruption" and to investigations and prosecutions by the CICIG and the Public Ministry. These maneuvers, however, only serve to cover up Guatemala's underlying social misery and the capitalist policies responsible for these social crimes against the working class and poor.

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