

# Heavy rains and avalanches kill dozens in Peru

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Heavy rains have caused dozens of rivers in Peru to overflow and triggered widespread landslides claiming the lives of at least 39 people and leaving at least 10,000 affected. Hundreds have lost their homes.

The floods have inundated entire villages, while avalanches of mud and stones have demolished homes, schools and medical facilities, while laying waste to thousands of hectares of arable land.

Last week, mudslides buried a mining camp, leaving seven miners missing and presumed dead.

It is feared that as the result of the floods, the dengue virus transmitted by mosquitoes may reappear, threatening to claim more victims, especially among children.

Last Sunday, heavy rains fell in the northernmost part of Peru, Tumbes, for more than 11 hours, making commercial activity impossible and shutting down the border crossing with Ecuador.

Also, the main highway linking Lima with the interior of the country, vital for bringing food supplies into the Peruvian capital, was blocked for more than 12 hours over the weekend after an avalanche covered it 62 kilometers from Lima. Hundreds of people were trapped in buses without food or water.

In Lima, the lack of food from the provinces has increased the cost of chicken—a staple in the Peruvian diet—by 42 percent.

In Huaraz, popular among Andean mountain climbers, the streets and central market flooded, creating problems in providing local food supplies.

Last Thursday, Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra visited some of the storm-damaged areas to assess the effects of the flooding. The storms are affecting virtually every coastal district in Peru, from the border with Ecuador in the north, almost to the southern border with Bolivia. The government has declared states of emergencies in virtually every one of these

districts—Tumbes, Piura, Lambayeque, Cajamarca, La Libertad and Ica—all located on Peru's Pacific Coast, as the waters cascade down from the Andes Mountains and flood the rivers. Weather forecasts predict that the rains will continue for another two months.

It is still too early to predict whether this year's flooding and landslides will reach the critical status of the "El Niño Costero" (coastal storms caused by the warming of Peru's and Ecuador's Pacific Coasts) of 2017. The 2017 storms and flooding destroyed more than 115,000 homes, killed a total of 113 people, destroyed some 1,500 miles of roads and affected an estimated 1.1 million people. Another 3 million people were put at risk of waterborne diseases.

The already catastrophic effects of today's storms are due not merely to a natural disaster, but more directly to the government's abject failure to repair the massive damage caused two years ago and prepare for another, inevitable catastrophe. Many families who lost their homes in 2017 are still living in tents.

At the time of the 2017 crisis, Peru's Central Reserve Bank estimated that repairing bridges and roads would cost \$US3.8 billion. Though it later increased that estimate by \$US1.5 billion, it became clear that this expanded BCR estimation would only cover 19 percent of the actual amount needed.

In 2017, the government headed by President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski handed over the reconstruction effort to firms such as the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, generating massive profits for private corporations. He claimed that the private sector would be more efficient than the state in repairing the damages and restoring the affected towns and cities. Instead of using government funds and personnel to immediately begin reconstruction, he spent months negotiating juicy contracts with national and international private companies.

Kuczynski, a former Wall Street banker who personifies

the corrupt relations of the Peruvian bourgeoisie and with foreign capital, was forced to resign in March 2018 because of his connections with Odebrecht, a company whose name has become synonymous with kickbacks and corruption across Latin America.

The management of natural disasters in favor of profit demonstrates the rapaciousness of a capitalist ruling elite that cares nothing for the lives of rural and city poor, schoolchildren and the elderly. Capitalism lends in crises, demanding profits well above the average, claiming that they are making risky investments. The enormous expected profits come not from any additional risk, but because they are negotiated with the state, an entity full of their corrupt “compadres”.

Peruvians have made it clear they have no confidence in the government. According to a poll done by Commerce-Ipsos, 50 percent believe that the country is unprepared to respond to the flooding crisis, while 41 percent believe it is poorly prepared.

The overwhelming disdain of Peruvians for the Lima government is well-founded. Even as the growing disaster was unfolding on Peru’s coast, Peruvian prosecutors last week began taking testimony from convicted Odebrecht executives in Curitiba, Brazil, who described how the company spread bribes to Peruvian politicians, ranging from \$5,000 to candidates for mayor to millions for those running for president. Four former presidents are implicated in the scandal—Alejandro Toledo, Alan Garcia, Ollanta Humala and Kuczynski.

While Peru’s current President Vizcarra praised the prosecutors’ work in Brazil, saying that it would allow them to get “to bottom of the truth and punish” those involved in corruption, he has himself been implicated in the Odebrecht affair. As he prepares, like his predecessor, to cut new lucrative contracts with Peruvian construction companies to “exploit” the never completed reconstruction from the 2017 catastrophe, his government confronts the threat of an explosion of popular anger and a resurgence of class conflict in Peru.



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