

# Hundreds dead and missing after Eta devastates Central America and southern Mexico

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Hurricane Eta continued to break records in intensity as it caused widespread devastation and incalculable suffering across the entire Central American isthmus and much of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico.

As of this writing, 98 people have been found dead and 187 have been reported missing, while many more casualties are feared as rescuers reach communities isolated by the flooding and damage to roads and bridges. Millions have seen their livelihoods uprooted by the destruction of homes, public services, roads, and countless acres of plantations.

The rampant social devastation in the region, which is the product of the historical and intensifying neocolonial exploitation by US imperialism, had already been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the storm, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America had estimated that the Central American economy would contract 6.5 percent this year and sink over 1.5 million more people into official poverty.

Amid low levels of testing, the region has reported 512,572 coronavirus cases and 12,075 deaths, while the Pan-American Health Organization has warned that the storm has increased the threat of infection. The mass displacements of people, the crowding into shelters and water availability issues are compounded by the near total lack of emergency measures to prevent contagion.

Colorado State University specialist Philip Klotzbach found that, in the satellite era (post-1966), the 2020 Atlantic Hurricane Season has had the most named storms, the third most named-storm days, the second most hurricanes and fourth most major hurricanes. Eta became the 12th named storm to make landfall in the continental US, compared to the previous record of nine storms in 1916.

As recently as November 1, Typhoon Goni made the strongest cyclonic landfall in recorded history at 195 mph, devastating the Philippines .

*Scientific American* reported in October that the factors that have contributed to this hurricane season in the Atlantic involved “unusually warm” ocean temperatures as well as low sea level pressure and favorable wind conditions. It indicates that, while research does not indicate that climate change will increase the total number of storms, they will grow in strength.

“Studies suggest that climate change will increase the speed at which hurricanes intensify over the ocean,” the magazine explains. Hurricane Eta intensified at record levels right before making landfall as a strong Category 4 storm in eastern Nicaragua, before becoming a tropical depression as it crossed through eastern Honduras.

The storm wiped out small communities in the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, where 30,000 people were evacuated. The government has acknowledged that two artisanal miners died but no official accounting of the damages has been provided.

Damage in Panama was concentrated in the Chiriquí province bordering Costa Rica. Landslides and flooding killed at least 17 people and left 68 missing, according to the Security Ministry.

In Costa Rica, a couple died after their home was swept away by a landslide. Authorities have reported that 1,872 people were sent to shelters after their homes were destroyed or placed at risk, while the destruction of roads and public infrastructure left 19 towns temporarily isolated and tens of thousands without power or running water.

Honduras saw the most widespread damage, including at least 26 dead and six missing reported so far. Large portions of the city of San Pedro Sula, the industrial center of the country with more than 1 million inhabitants, were submerged under a meter of water. Authorities have given estimates that across Honduras hundreds of thousands of homes and 1.7 million people were affected, with many losing all their belongings.

Thousands in surrounding communities in the Sula Valley were cut off, with residents waiting days to be rescued from rooftops. The news program “Hoy Mismo” received a call from a woman requesting a helicopter or boat. “We haven’t eaten for two days and there are about 60 of us here with children,” she exclaimed.

More than 16,000 people had been rescued by Sunday in the Sula Valley, where operations continued involving 50,000 rescue personnel and helicopters sent from the United States and even Guatemala, which was also severely affected.

Some of the most affected communities are those surrounding the Chiquita banana plantations in La Lima, with survivors describing a continuing nightmare. Speaking to *La Prensa*, a man said 300 people crammed into his second floor to escape the flooding, living “moments of desperation.” Another says: “We were trapped, have no food or water for the children. Some desperate mothers are using water from the river itself to prepare baby bottles. We are in a state of calamity, surviving the flood, but now families are hungry and in need of water, clothes and mattresses.”

In Guatemala, the entire indigenous village of Quejá, with approximately 150 households, was buried under a landslide. The state disaster agency Conred announced that five bodies have been recovered from Quejá and 108 are missing, but family members estimate at least 200 missing.

A specialized group of Mexican rescuers known as “The Moles” arrived at Quejá to help find survivors. Meanwhile, hard-hit residents of Cobán protested against Guatemala’s right-wing President Alejandro Giammattei when he visited, indicating the anger the catastrophe has stirred against the corrupt ruling elite.

The authorities report that in other areas of the country, 22 others have been found dead, more than 150,000 people have been directly affected, and 14,000

were evacuated and sheltered.

Widespread flooding in the northeast of Guatemala has destroyed vast swaths of crops, public infrastructure and homes. Over 500 acres of rice plantations in the eastern Polochic Valley of Guatemala were damaged, while residents in Bilwi, where flooding took entire homes, are already re-building in the same places.

In the southern Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas, thousands of homes were destroyed by flooding, forcing at least 80,000 people into shelters and leaving at least 27 dead and four missing. Five people drowned in Tabasco, while 22 others died in Chiapas, including many drowned by flash flooding. Several towns remain isolated.

About 1,700 people were sheltered in El Salvador, where one fisherman was killed. While not reporting any casualties, authorities in Belize, Jamaica and Cuba described major flooding of residential and agricultural areas, the destruction of roads and large evacuations.

While heavy rainfall continued in Cuba, Jamaica and the Bahamas, Eta reached southern Florida on Sunday night leading to some flooding in Miami. The US National Hurricane Center (NHC) forecasts that the storm will turn to the Florida Gulf Coast as it reaches hurricane conditions on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The NHC has warned that a new tropical system in the Caribbean has a 50 percent chance of becoming tropical cyclone Theta before reaching Nicaragua on Sunday.



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