

Second major hurricane hits Central America in two weeks

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16 November 2020

Hurricane Iota reached eastern Nicaragua on Monday night as a Category 5 storm with sustained winds of 160 mph. Less than two weeks after Hurricane Eta made landfall in the exact same location and caused widespread devastation across Central and North America, the US National Hurricane Center is forecasting “catastrophic impacts” from another record-setting storm.

From Panama to North Carolina, Eta left at least 178 dead and 120 missing. The UN has estimated that over 2.5 million people were affected, including 1.3 million in Honduras, 640,000 in Guatemala and 180,000 in southern Mexico.

Ahead of the arrival of Iota, the UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that 358,000 people remain in shelters in Central America.

“What Hurricane Eta left is not just a humanitarian catastrophe that requires immediate attention, but it has seeded future migration crises that we must seek to prevent,” warned regional IOM director Michele Klein-Solomon.

According to hurricane specialist Philip Klotzbach at Colorado State University, Hurricane Iota marks the first time the Atlantic has seen two major hurricanes in November. Amid a long list of records, Iota is the first Category 5 hurricane of the 2020 hurricane season in the Atlantic and is stronger, quantified by its lower pressure, than Hurricane Katrina when it destroyed New Orleans in 2005.

For the first time on record, Iota is the third storm in a single season to intensify at or above 60 knots (nautical miles per hour) in 24 hours, according to Tomer Burg, a PhD meteorology student at the University of Oklahoma.

Iota is expected to continue westward and impact the largest city and capital of Honduras, Tegucigalpa, potentially with tropical storm intensity, before reaching El Salvador.

From the storms being intensified by higher sea surface

temperatures due to global warming—on top of five years of crops damaged by droughts in the region—to the “herd immunity” policy of governments leaving the impoverished masses to fend for themselves against the COVID-19 pandemic, Central America is confronting a catastrophe created by the capitalist subordination of every concern to private profit.

Before the hurricanes saturated the soil and the pandemic tipped over an already collapsed health care system, the stage had been set by Wall Street’s imperialist plunder and the concentration of the remaining resources in the hands of a tiny oligarchy.

Two members of the Miskito community in Nicaragua’s Puerto Cabezas, which was directly impacted by Hurricane Eta and was about to be hit by Iota, spoke to the WSWs on condition of anonymity. They explained that the government of Daniel Ortega was able to evacuate those in the most vulnerable areas ahead of Eta and provided shelter and “some food” to most, mainly in schools.

However, having lost the roof of his home, one of them explained, “Aid for reconstruction is only being provided to [Sandinista] party members.”

Before the connection was lost due to worsening weather, the other man explained, “Ninety-five percent of our community was destroyed, and we still have no power. The generator at this place [shelter] was also damaged.”

Both are survivors of Hurricane Mitch, which killed about 7,000 people in Honduras and nearly 4,000 in Nicaragua, becoming the deadliest Atlantic hurricane on record. While never recovering, the primarily indigenous communities in the Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region of Nicaragua have endured further shocks from the economic crisis and state repression following the wave of anti-austerity protests in 2018. This has been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic.

While the Nicaraguan authorities have not given a general estimate of the damage from Eta, the emergency agency Sinapred has warned that 80,000 families will be directly affected by Hurricane Iota and that evacuations have been underway since Friday in coastal communities.

Photographer Manuel Portillo, who is documenting the devastation caused by Eta in Honduras, described widespread “dismay, uncertainty and trauma” to the WSWS on Monday. “Again after 1998 with Hurricane Mitch, we see a major hurricane that clearly exposes the vulnerability of the country and our authorities.”

“The crux of the matter is the lack of an evacuation plan. People have not been provided with decent shelters. A place with drinking water, bathrooms, basic needs does not exist. People left on their own vehicles, some on foot, some on motorcycles, carrying whatever few belongings they could salvage.”

Portillo explained that most survived because of the help from fellow Hondurans. “Only thanks to the help from the people have most been rescued, have most of those affected received food. There have been hundreds and hundreds of donations,” he said.

“For years, thousands of families have emigrated due to the socio-political situation in the country, and this is leaving thousands of families literally on the street,” he added. Citing a report that up to 25,000 jobs will be lost in the Choloma municipality, he concludes: “Many transnational factories there were flooded, losing everything in the workplaces, and are planning on leaving. Where will those families work? ... This affects the poorest of the people, the most exposed families that find no other solution than leaving the country.”

Speaking to EFE, Honduran economist Alejandro Sikaffi estimated that Eta caused about \$5 billion in damages, much more than Hurricane Mitch. Together with the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sikaffi estimates \$12.5 billion in economic losses or half of the country’s yearly production.

Despite its growing vulnerability, Honduras does not have any fund designated to deal with natural emergencies.

The 2009 military coup backed by the Obama administration to install a puppet regime was followed by a wave of privatizations, tax cuts and social austerity. Debt servicing to financial vultures has risen to nearly a third of the government budget. The defense budget tripled. Former vice president and President-elect Joe Biden was Obama’s main envoy to the region during this period.

Now, ahead of an historic wave of migration from Central America to the United States, the Biden transition team has named as its top immigration adviser Cecilia Muñoz, who defended the separation of migrant families and massive deportations under the Obama administration, which deported nearly 217,000 Hondurans.

Meanwhile, as Donald Trump seeks to nullify his electoral defeat in the presidential elections and establish a presidential dictatorship, he has placed bigoted loyalists in the top offices of the Pentagon. Appointed as senior adviser to the secretary of defense, retired colonel Douglas MacGregor called for martial law on the US-Mexico border and the shooting of border crossers last year, claiming Central American migrants will cause the “collapse” of the nation and are a “human foundation for a permanent dictatorship of the left.”

Most Central American migrants are currently being rounded up in Mexico, whose President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has refused to recognize the Biden victory, citing his “friendship” with Trump. López’s administration has already turned the new National Guard into a key partner of Trump’s anti-immigrant forces and created what members of his own party have called “concentration camps” for immigrants.

All of the fundamental issues facing workers—the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of climate change, the efforts of the ruling elite and trade unions to exploit the pandemic crisis to restructure the global supply chains and deepen the exploitation of workers, pitting them against each other along national lines, and the threat of world war and dictatorship—are shared by all workers regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity or gender.

Beyond a natural disaster, the plight of those in the paths of Hurricanes Eta and Iota is the result of the explosion of the contradictions of global capitalism and its nation-state system, which has opened up a decade of social revolution.



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