

Hurricanes, unchecked pandemic produce humanitarian disaster in Nicaragua

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23 March 2021

A humanitarian disaster has developed in Nicaragua as the government of President Daniel Ortega crawls before corporate interests, particularly US imperialism, in its response to compounding political, economic and environmental crises.

Three years after cracking down on mass protests triggered by pension cuts demanded by the IMF, leaving over 300 dead and hundreds more injured, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) administration has employed increasingly authoritarian means to suppress popular opposition to its herd immunity policy toward the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most pressingly, four months after two major hurricanes devastated much of the impoverished northern Caribbean region of Nicaragua, hundreds of thousands remain deprived of basic necessities.

About half a million people in the northern Caribbean coastal region remain without running water, according to UNICEF, and “are relying on rainwater for consumption and sanitation” as the dry season begins. The agency adds that 1.8 million people are still in need of humanitarian aid, including 720,000 children.

The predominantly Miskito indigenous communities in the Caribbean region have been struggling for months with limited food, power and no water, while they struggle to reconstruct their homes from fallen trees.

An *Onda Local* report published last week found that the government aid has been limited to insufficient zinc sheets, nails and kitchenware, while residents demand wood, water, food and clothes. Moreover, relocations of entire towns and solid infrastructure for homes, roads, bridges, public buildings, water treatment and power are urgently needed as experts warn of a further intensification of storms due to global warming.

At Haulover, which had more than 1,000 inhabitants, the economy was based on receiving tourists attracted to its beaches, now turned into a mosquito-ridden wasteland.

At Wauhta Bar, which depends on agriculture, a woman explained: “We do several kinds of jobs here, our own businesses. Before the hurricane, we raised animals, sold fish. ... But we are now entirely paralyzed.” Families have no money to invest in grains, animals or boats, the report adds.

The United Nations World Food Program estimated that the population going hungry multiplied by four in the last two years in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, with 1.7 million suffering an “emergency” level of food insecurity. Food scarcity is particularly critical along the Pacific region, which has been

dubbed “The Central American Dry Corridor” after years of severe droughts.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus continues to spread unhindered. The Health Ministry has reported a total of 6,582 coronavirus cases and 176 deaths—the lowest official death toll per million in the Americas, except for Haiti. However, the Ortega administration never implemented a shutdown of schools or nonessential activities, and these figures are a gross undercount. Reports of overwhelmed hospitals and nightly burials as early as May 2020 were followed by a wave of firings of outspoken health care workers.

The COVID-19 Citizens Observatory, composed of public health care workers and officials who compile figures on suspected COVID-19 cases and deaths based on symptoms, has reported a total of 13,728 suspected cases and 3,009 deaths as of March 17, including 117 fatalities among health care workers. The report cites seven new deaths in the previous week and warns specifically of growing outbreaks among students and teachers.

A multidisciplinary scientific committee, also created by health care specialists during the pandemic, found that just between March and August, according to government data, the country saw 7,772 excess deaths.

The vaccination program began on March 2 on patients with chronic comorbidities, against the World Health Organization recommendation to begin with health care personnel. The country has received 135,000 doses from the UN-led COVAX Program and 6,000 doses donated by Russia.

The Sandinista officials have boasted that the country saw a 9.5 percent increase in exports during 2020, presumably the only country in the world with such a jump. The chair of the Economics Commission in Parliament, Wálmaro Gutiérrez, exclaimed on television: “The reality, the facts, the results have demonstrated that the decision to not close the economy was the most correct.”

But while major textile and agricultural transnationals continue pumping profits from Nicaragua’s poorly paid workers, commerce and other sectors were gravely hit given that most Nicaraguans have sought to limit their own exposure to the virus. About 21,000 formal jobs affiliated to the social security system were lost in 2020 and many more were lost in the informal sector, which comprises 75 percent of the workforce.

The business consulting firm Copades, which has previously hailed Ortega’s policies, estimated that about 30 percent of the economically active population did not generate any income in

2020, and denounced the government for not providing any aid whatsoever to workers or small businesses.

The UN Economic Commission for Latin America forecasts that the percentage of individuals under the poverty threshold will increase from 46 percent to 50.7 percent due to the 2020 crises.

Since the mass protests and repression of 2018, 88,000 Nicaraguans have requested political asylum in Costa Rica, where over 300,000 Nicaraguans live. The super-exploited Nicaraguan migrants represented at one point one-third of all infections in Costa Rica, even as the percentage with jobs fell from 93 percent to 59 percent in 2020, according to the UN.

While tax revenues remained relatively stable, the FSLN administration requested \$1.67 billion in loans in 2019-2020. This includes at least \$185 million from the IMF, approved last November. This is politically significant given the absolute rejection of Venezuela's request for an emergency loan. The IMF has expressed great confidence in Nicaragua's ability to pay back its loans, even after three consecutive years of recession.

"A widening of the budget deficit this year to preserve public health and contain the economic impact of the pandemic is appropriate," the IMF announcement reads. It adds: "The authorities are committed to safeguard medium-term debt sustainability and rebuild buffers once the pandemic abates," including "structural reforms." These are the usual euphemisms for deep social cuts.

Behind this assurance lies the willingness of the Ortega regime to brutally suppress opposition in the working class against austerity and to sacrifice countless lives for corporate profits during the pandemic. A constitutional reform approved in January will punish open-ended "hate crimes" with life sentences, while 13 of the participants during the 2018 protests remain behind bars.

Nicaragua is the only Central American country that didn't record a public deficit for 2019, after its social spending fell 3.3 percent. Social spending per capita fell from \$207 to \$190, making it next to Honduras the lowest in the Americas, compared to over \$2,500 in Chile and Uruguay.

Beyond its pro-investor policies, the most important step in winning the favor of US imperialism has been the abandonment of the project to build a transoceanic canal with a Chinese firm, which disappeared from public discussion after the 2018 protests. Under Ortega, Nicaragua has also participated in the yearly Panamax military exercises sponsored by the United States on the pretext of protecting the Panama Canal.

This rapprochement with Washington has been reciprocated through IMF loans, a symbolic amount of USAID assistance after the hurricanes, and a regime of sanctions on officials and public institutions that has remained far less onerous than those destroying the economies of Iran and Venezuela.

The thuggish threats by Washington have continued, however, to keep the Ortega regime aligned with US imperialism as Washington escalates its "great power" confrontation with China and Russia.

Biden's State Department accused Ortega of pushing Nicaragua toward "dictatorship," while the US Southern Command chief, Adm. Craig Faller, named Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua as "malign regional state actors." Faller claimed Russia is employing

security and humanitarian assistance "in a strategy to subjugate the Nicaraguan government and counter U.S. regional goals," while significantly not mentioning China.

Moreover, in 2020, the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) disbursed \$1.57 million for its programs in Nicaragua, which are used to finance anti-Ortega media, political parties and protest groups. This brings the total spent by the NED in Nicaragua to \$6 million in the past five years.

Nonetheless, these US-sponsored organizations, including politicians and student leaders who physically reported to the US State Department, played a key role in channeling mass demonstrations behind futile talks with the Ortega administration throughout 2018.

On Monday, Biden named Ricardo Zúñiga, former director for Western Hemisphere Affairs in Obama's National Security Council, as his special envoy to the Northern Triangle of Central America. During a recent discussion hosted by the Inter-American Dialogue, he joined several think-tank pundits and former Central American presidents in appealing to Biden to include Nicaragua in its \$4 billion plan for the Northern Triangle, with Zúñiga stating "Nicaragua should be part of everything."

At the Inter-American Dialogue forum, Cristiana Chamorro, likely presidential candidate and daughter of the former US-backed president Violeta Barrios, called the Ortega regime "a threat for the security of the American continent," only to appeal immediately to the Biden administration to "negotiate with Ortega and understand what Ortega needs in this moment," and to eventually "begin deep negotiations to restore democracy."

The US-backed opposition parties, which remain overwhelmingly unpopular according to polls, have denounced police harassment and efforts to disrupt their campaigns ahead of the November 2021 presidential elections. However, while they remain deeply divided, they have insisted on participating in the elections and pursuing a common ticket.

The right-wing policies and widespread poverty overseen by the FSLN, which first came to power during the 1979 Revolution as one of the most radical petty-bourgeois nationalist movements in the hemisphere, stand as proof of the dead end represented by all pro-capitalist nationalist tendencies, long promoted as alternatives to the fight for a genuinely Marxist leadership in the working class.



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