Death toll mounts after Category 5 hurricane destroys Acapulco, Mexico

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The once iconic seaport and resort town of Acapulco in southern Mexico has been devastated by a Category 5 hurricane, after forecasters and authorities failed to see it coming.

"We have experienced the end of the world and still have some way to go," one man told *El País*, whose reporter Pablo Ferri wrote Saturday, "Acapulco has collapsed. It is no more. We don't know how many have died."

While the data still needs to be carefully studied, climate scientists and meteorologists cited by the media already point to the most likely culprit: global warming caused by rapidly increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

The population center of 1 million looked like a war zone after the eye of Hurricane Otis made landfall in the middle of the night between Tuesday and Wednesday, tearing off roofs, downing power lines and telecommunication towers and leaving hotels, homes and other buildings near the shore as bare skeletons.

Working class sections of the city closer to the hills and far from the resorts saw flash flooding and landslides, and the scenes are of utter chaos. Workers are reportedly having to remove the mountains of debris in their neighborhoods themselves, with countless families losing their furniture, appliances and cars. Schools, clinics and markets were destroyed.

In a context of already rampant inequality, the socioeconomic impact will be felt for years and affect the poorest disproportionately, as hundreds of thousands of livelihoods have been erased overnight.

Meanwhile, the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, has responded with callousness and a massive mobilization of troops mainly to intimidate the victims as anger grows.

The official death toll is 43, on top of 36 disappeared. However, Eyder Peralta and James Fredrick from NPR photographed security officials pulling bodies from the water on Friday. One of them said that they had recovered 50 bodies that day and warned they would likely keep finding bodies for weeks.

Four days after landfall, much of the population has no water, electricity, gas, running water, food, diapers and other necessities. Small and larger businesses have all been wiped clean, and desperation is setting in.

"We don't even have tortillas to put in our mouths," Ángel, from Radio Coco, told *Animal Político* on Saturday. "Many days have passed, and we have yet to receive any aid. We need water, lots of water, and also food. People are already going hungry and were left even without a single blanket at home."

Residents from the poorest neighborhoods wander for hours in search of water, food, fuel and cellphone signals. Lines of people with bottles for gasoline to leave the city run for kilometers and scuffles with police cutting the line have broken out.

On the other hand, the government seeks to portray falsely that they have the situation under control. "We are moving very fast," said Minister of Government Luisa Alcalde to reporters in Acapulco on Saturday, "We have deployed 15,000 troops and will reach all the neighborhoods."

AMLO, who has repeatedly shown his indifference for the lives and health of workers and poor throughout the pandemic and other disasters, declared after reporting an initial death toll of 27, "Even though the death of any person is unfortunate, there weren't very many."

Until a judge repealed the order on Saturday, the AMLO administration actively prevented trucks from aid groups and private donors from even approaching Acapulco for several days. Reports in the local media, meanwhile, make clear that the military only began distributing aid in significant amounts on Friday, and many communities are still isolated.

The event left meteorologists flabbergasted. In about 12

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hours, Otis intensified from a Tropical Storm with 50 mph (85 km/h) winds to a Category 5 Hurricane, with sustained windspeeds surpassing 160 mph (260 km/h), before barreling into Acapulco as the most powerful landfalling Pacific hurricane on record.

The US National Hurricane Center initially predicted the storm drifting away from the shore and, only 24 hours before impact, it forecast a peak of intensity of 70 mph winds, below hurricane category. Then, the NHC described a "nightmare scenario" when it upgraded its advisory to Category 5 shortly before landfall. The agency's director Michael Brennan pointed to the lack of ocean buoys and radar in the East Pacific, forcing forecasters to rely on satellite data.

The Mexican government had issued only a tropical storm warning at the time, ordering evacuations only four hours before impact.

Only the 2015 Hurricane Patricia, which is the most powerful tropical cyclone on record worldwide, matched as rapid an intensification as Otis, however it weakened before making landfall in western Mexico.

Earlier this month, Hurricane Lidia saw another rapid intensification and caused extensive damage in southwestern Mexico as the fifth most powerful hurricane to make landfall in the Pacific.

In each case, meteorologists have pointed to warm ocean temperatures, associated with higher moisture, as the main fuel or energy source behind the rapid intensification of these tropical cyclones. So while there was an element of a black swan event with Otis, the persistence of favorable conditions for rapid intensification should have led to much more aggressive preparations.

In the Pacific Ocean, winds generally push warmer surface water toward Asia, forming a large warm pool in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, along with eastward bands of rain. These dominant patterns are called the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO).

A 2019 study led by Roxy Koll, lead author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), found that global warming has "warped" the MJO and doubled the size and further heated this warm ocean pool in the Pacific since 1900, including off the coasts of Mexico and Central America.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which funded the study, warned that these changes "can influence everything from monsoons and the El Niño-Southern Oscillation to tropical cyclones and other extreme events like heat waves and snowstorms in the United States."

The waters crossed by Otis were "super hot," said Karthik Belguru, scientist at the Pacific Northest National Laboratory, to the *Washington Post*, which also cited a recent study that found that 24-hour rapid intensification events have surged between 1990 and 2021.

While a strong El Niño predicted for 2023-2024, which weakens the westward winds in the Pacific and allows warmer waters to move east may have also played a role, meteorologists point to the general warming of the oceans as the main factor.

A preprint by NOAA found that the global average sea surface temperature (SSTA) broke a record in March 2023 and set new records in April, July and August, coining a new term "super marine heatwaves." It attributes these new records chiefly to the decades-long trend of warming, followed by the natural shifts to El Niño (which explained 17 percent of the SST anomaly) and the Pacific-Atlantic-Arctic Oscillation (explaining 6 percent of the SST anomaly).

While the media, officials and many scientists blame all society for global warming and its consequences, that couldn't be further from the truth. As the WSWS wrote in a perspective on record temperatures earlier this year:

> "Humanity" is not to blame; capitalism is. What really blocks every effort to seriously address the climate crisis is the profit system, the subordination of economic life to private profit and the division of the world into rival nation-states.

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