

Peru's 'El Niño 2026': Heat, floods and criminal government neglect claim scores of lives

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Peru is reeling from an intense wave of heat, torrential rains, landslides and river floods that have already claimed 68 lives and affected nearly 200,000 people in barely three months. While families dig through mud and debris for survivors, the country's Congress debates anything but the crisis. The disaster has exposed once again how a corrupt ruling oligarchy and its political representatives are unable and unwilling to protect the lives and welfare of the masses of Peruvian working people.

The capital, Lima, is enduring an unprecedented heatwave. February brought 18 straight days of record-breaking temperatures, soaring above 34.5 °C (94 °F) — a full seven degrees above normal, according to the National Meteorology and Hydrology Service (SENAMHI). Streets melted in the sun, while thousands in Peru's interior faced flash floods and mountain avalanches.

The phenomenon fueling this destruction is "El Niño Costero 2026," a recurring warm-water current originating near Ecuador. Fishermen named it El Niño centuries ago because it appears around Christmas — a nod to the Christ Child. But this year's version, scientists warn, is intensified by global warming, turning what was once a cyclical weather pattern into a climate emergency.

Past episodes have left deep scars: the 1982-83 El Niño leveled whole villages; the 1997-98 wave killed more than 500 people; and the 2017 Coastal El Niño left much of the country buried under mud. Yet despite those repeated lessons, Peru's political class has done almost nothing to prepare.

After decades of warnings, there is still no comprehensive emergency management plan. Flood

defenses, early-warning systems and adequate urban drainage remain unfinished or nonexistent.

Observers say the real reason is political: at least 60 percent of Peru's lawmakers are currently under criminal investigation for corruption, influence-peddling or document forgery. "Coastal El Niño 2026," in effect, strikes a country whose government has spent more energy defending corrupt politicians than building its future.

Some analysts have described the damage as "state-made." Laws passed after the 2017 disaster were either poorly executed or left to gather dust. The government, dominated by business elites in Lima, remains fixated on pleasing international investors while ignoring rural and working class Peruvians.

For those outside the capital, the message is bitterly clear: "They don't give a damn."

From late 2025 through February 2026, 68 people have died. Victims include a school principal drowned when his boat capsized on the Picha River, and a national police officer swept away while trying to rescue a stranded dog on the Rímac River. On February 22, a search-and-rescue helicopter crashed in Chala (Arequipa), killing all 15 aboard.

Damage assessments are staggering: nearly 1,000 homes destroyed, more than 5,000 made uninhabitable, 6,000 hectares of farmland lost. Economists estimate total costs at 291 million soles (roughly \$US 84 million).

Meanwhile, inequality has deepened. Peru's business and banking elite rely on private hospitals and schools — paying up to US \$2,000 a month for each child — while public services for workers and small farmers crumble. The poor pay the price of elite misrule in both

health and housing.

Lima's minimal rainfall led successive governments to ignore the need for proper sewage and drainage systems, not just in the capital but across the coastal region. When the rains arrived, streets turned to rivers and towns into lakes.

The floods have also sparked disease outbreaks, as stagnant water breeds mosquitoes and bacteria. With no effective containment plans, the government bears direct responsibility for the mounting death toll.

The authorities had ample warning. After the 2017 tragedy, Congress authorized funding for prevention projects. But in a country that has seen eight presidents in 10 years, follow-through was nonexistent amid unending scandal and mounting crises.

According to SENAMHI, March will bring even higher temperatures, with some days surpassing 30 °C (86 °F) and suffocating humidity.

Highland regions above 2,800 meters can expect hailstorms, while areas above 3,800 meters may see snow, lightning, and winds of up to 35 km/h.

And yet, key flood-control works remain unfinished or delayed, particularly in Piura, Tumbes and other northern cities where working class and migrant families build homes along riverbanks. Every year the pattern repeats: disaster, deaths, outrage, pledges — and then silence.

Urban planning failures have compounded the crisis. Housing developments expand haphazardly onto swamp lands and dry riverbeds, while corruption stalls rebuilding efforts. Much of the nation's infrastructure is simply too old or poorly built to withstand the onslaught of a changing climate.

"The problem isn't nature," says one Lima engineer quoted by local media. "It's negligence."

Experts warn that a future "super El Niño" could eclipse even this year's devastation, fueled by rising ocean temperatures, denser populations, and decaying public works.

For now, Peru's response remains reactive, not preventive — sending aid only after rivers overflow. The cost, human and economic, continues to mount.

While Lima and Callao are gripped by rising violence from extortion gangs, much of Peru faces a fight against the forces of nature — and the apathy of those in power. Billions of soles promised for disaster prevention have yet to materialize on the ground.

Each new emergency exposes the same vicious circle: corruption breeds incompetence, incompetence breeds tragedy, and tragedy becomes normalized.

Until that cycle is broken by a revolutionary movement from below, every new "El Niño" will find the same old Peru — unprepared and riven by social inequality, with the working population paying for the criminality and indifference of the capitalist ruling class and its imperialist patrons.



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