

As forest fires spread across Peru, convergence of El Niño and war threatens survival of millions

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The October 1 front page of *La República*, one of Peru's leading newspapers, carried two reports revealing the convergence of environmental catastrophe and economic crisis. Gasoline prices had risen 40.6 percent over the preceding year, while forest fires were spreading across Cusco, Áncash and Ucayali, threatening rural communities and exposing the government's inadequate preparations for increasingly destructive climatic conditions.

From Guatemala to Peru's southern Andes, torrential rains and devastating droughts threaten agriculture, livestock and the survival of millions of impoverished families as a Super El Niño builds in the Pacific. Yet the right-wing governments of the region prioritize tens of billions of dollars in weapons purchases for repression and war over protecting their populations from the approaching disaster.

Forest fires spreading across the Peruvian Andes and Amazon have revealed the vulnerability of communities already exposed to extreme weather. *La República* reported that fires were becoming increasingly frequent in highland and Amazonian regions, warning that climate change and prolonged dry periods could aggravate their severity.

According to the National Forest and Wildlife Service (SERFOR), as of October 8, Apurímac had recorded 576 fires, followed by Ucayali with 383, San Martín with 367, Junín with 344 and Loreto with 338. Approximately 16,000 hectares were affected in Cusco and another 4,638 hectares in Áncash.

Six people have died, including an 11-year-old girl, Rosmeri, and her 18-year-old brother, Clinton, who succumbed to burns in Pomacanchi, Cusco.

Many fires originate in agricultural burning intended to prepare land for cultivation. However, exceptionally dry vegetation and strong winds can transform localized fires stemming from agricultural practices into uncontrollable disasters. This makes prevention, firefighting resources and rapid emergency intervention indispensable.

One of the most disturbing aspects of Peru's wildfire emergency is that affected communities have been largely abandoned to fight the flames themselves. In Cusco, residents and veterinary students from the National University of San Antonio Abad joined firefighting efforts. According to *La República*, some communities received little government assistance, while employers refused to release volunteer firefighters from work. Even small business owners, subjected to the imperatives of capitalist profit, placed business above human lives. They had the example of government ministers who refused to postpone trips abroad as the Andes and Amazon burned.

Foreign Minister Carlos Espá attended an Organization of American States (OAS) meeting in Washington, October 1-3, supporting Washington's sanctions against Nicaragua under the pretext of defending democratic rights. Housing Minister Mauricio Arnillas traveled there

September 29-October 3 for a forum promoting private investment and public-private partnerships as solutions to Latin America's housing crisis. Health Minister Luis Dyer left for the United States on October 7 for a week of meetings with corporate executives on health services and technology, rather than personally assessing the needs of devastated communities.

President Keiko Fujimori declared El Niño preparedness a government priority, announcing approximately 800 million soles (\$238.8 million) for flood and drought prevention. Measures included a national contingency plan to anticipate floods and droughts rather than react after disasters occur, along with large-scale river dredging, flood defenses and watershed protection.

Although these measures have reportedly been completed, they remain inadequate when compared with the destruction caused by previous El Niño events, particularly the catastrophe of 1982-83.

A subsequent supplementary budget request of 8.2 billion soles, sent to Congress on September 30, included security, infrastructure and healthcare expenditures rather than exclusively financing El Niño prevention.

This contemptuous conduct exposes Fujimori's priorities and recalls her father's legacy. Alberto Fujimori, convicted of crimes against humanity, imposed policies that deepened inequality and unemployment. His 1993 Constitution, defended by the bourgeoisie, enshrined the free-market restructuring of the 1990s.

The fires also threaten tourism, Peru's third-largest source of foreign exchange. On October 2, flames reached the Llanganuco area of Huascarán National Park in Áncash, temporarily forcing the suspension of tourist visits and threatening communities dependent on visitors. The government's response leaves little doubt that its concern is lost tourist dollars, not the lives of isolated, abandoned communities. Its determination to maintain business as usual recalls the ruling class's response during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Peru recorded the highest per capita death rate in the world, leaving working people to confront increasingly catastrophic emergencies largely on their own.

Fires' impact compounded by war and fuel price hikes

The social impact of the fires is compounded by a surge in fuel prices driven by the unprovoked US-Israeli war against Iran, which has disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea and raised freight, insurance, fuel, electricity and fertilizer prices. Peru's dependence on trucking makes rising fuel costs particularly devastating, driving up food

prices, reducing consumption and threatening recession.

Bolivia provides a glimpse of what is to come: dollar shortages and exorbitant fuel prices paralyzed economic activity in 2025, provoking a 50-day national strike and mass protests by miners, workers, students and small businesspeople.

At the same time, governments across the region are arming themselves. Donald Trump, the would-be Führer, launched the Shield of the Americas in March 2026, enlisting 14 lackey Latin American governments in Washington's campaign to contain Chinese economic influence and secure the region's natural resources. Peru received US approval for a proposed \$3.42 billion package of 12 F-16 fighters in September 2025, and its Finance Ministry announced an initial \$462 million payment to Lockheed Martin in April 2026, nearly double the 800 million soles the government has announced for El Niño prevention.

Argentina purchased 24 secondhand F-16 fighter aircraft from Denmark for \$301.2 million. Colombia signed a \$3.62 billion agreement for 17 Swedish Gripen fighters in November 2025 and contracted to acquire two Brazilian KC-390 military transport aircraft in August 2026. Ecuador received US approval for a proposed \$64 million military rifle package.

These developments have a common source. While multinational corporations and their supply chains demonstrate humanity's capacity to plan production and allocate resources on a global scale, this potential is subordinated to the competition among rival capitals for a greater share of surplus value, rooted in the private ownership of the means of production, and to the division of the world into rival nation-states. The environmental consequences of their activities, meanwhile, are disregarded.

The consequences are now provoking and converging with the 2026-27 Super El Niño. According to the October 8 report of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Pacific sea surface temperatures reached 2.1°C above average in the Niño 3.4 region and 3.9°C above average off Ecuador and Peru (Niño 1+2). The report estimated a probability exceeding 83 percent that strong-to-very-strong El Niño conditions would persist through January-March 2027, potentially extending into June 2027.

Relatively small and local disturbances can unleash catastrophic consequences, akin to the so-called "butterfly effect" or a chaotic and nonlinear evolution of the weather system. Changes in equatorial Pacific temperatures can contribute to extreme weather threatening millions: floods and agricultural losses in South America; droughts and cyclones in Central America; water shortages in the Pacific; hurricanes in the eastern Pacific; hunger and floods in Africa; disrupted Indian monsoons; droughts in Asia; and wildfires in Europe. Combined with the shocks produced by war, crop failures drive food inflation, shortages and economic instability, particularly in poorer, oil-importing countries.

Thus, the naturally occurring 2026-27 Super El Niño is unfolding against the backdrop of global warming driven by capitalist production, creating the conditions for a perfect storm.

Behind the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in the Middle East and Europe lies the decline of US imperialism as the world's dominant economic power, increasingly challenged by China and the European powers, and its resort to military violence in a bid to maintain supremacy.

The catastrophic precedent of 1982-83

Peru's catastrophic 1982-83 El Niño illustrates the approaching danger. Extraordinary ocean warming unleashed devastating floods along the northern coast and drought across the southern Andes, destroying roads, bridges, irrigation systems, homes and farmland while disrupting fisheries.

Economic losses reached \$3.28 billion, approximately 11.6 percent of

GDP. Applied to Peru's 2025 GDP of \$334.85 billion, that percentage represents \$38.8 billion, nearly half the government's 2026 budget of 257.562 billion soles (\$78.9 billion). With education and healthcare accounting for approximately 35 percent of public spending, such losses would exceed their combined annual budgets.

The human consequences were devastating. Impoverished families lost crops, livelihoods and resources for future planting. Destroyed roads isolated communities from markets, schools and hospitals, while contaminated water increased disease risks.

Today, expanding populations and infrastructure in vulnerable regions could magnify the destruction threatened by the approaching Super El Niño.

The socialist alternative

The question confronting humanity is whether its scientific and economic capabilities will be mobilized to prevent destruction or increasingly employed to produce it. The problem is not merely a shortage of resources, but a conflict over their allocation by the capitalist class.

Workers and the rural poor in Peru, Ecuador and countries worldwide require immediate protection against extreme weather, unreliable infrastructure and unprepared healthcare systems, together with sustained scientific preparedness. Yet under capitalism, these crises reinforce one another: climate disasters destroy agricultural production and infrastructure; energy shocks intensify inflation and poverty; and wars destroy productive capacity, divert public resources and obstruct international cooperation.

The climate, affecting oceans and the atmosphere, the world economy and the consequences of war are interconnected. The problems arising from them cannot be resolved through isolated national measures. The challenge is not simply to forecast the next El Niño or extinguish the next forest fire, but to organize society's immense scientific and productive resources around protecting human life.

The only solution is for the working class to take control of the means of production and use existing economic planning tools to pursue a long-term program: first, to meet every person's needs; and second, to prepare society to protect the planet from disasters, both foreseeable ones like El Niño and those that cannot be foreseen. This requires uniting workers in Peru and across Latin America with workers in the United States, Europe, China and internationally in a common struggle against imperialist war and the capitalist system, and building the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of that struggle.



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