

# ***MESOAMERICA***

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## **HONDURAS**

### **Hurricane Preparedness Saves Lives**

Hurricane Felix made landfall in Honduras on 5 Sep, causing intense rains and flooding along some rivers, but demonstrated the coordination capacity of state and local agencies under the leadership of the Permanent Commission on Contingencies (COPECO).

“This was not the case before, not when [Hurricane] Mitch happened. There used to be distrust among the institutions and the data were diffuse, confusing. Now we see a more coordinated team, from local governments and at the central level, which allowed a broad process of early warning for the citizens,” said Nabil Kawas, meteorologist and professor at the public Autonomous National University of Honduras.

The National Meteorological Service has acquired more experience, he said. Following training in '05, it can now predict more effectively the amount of rainfall in specific areas, which allows monitoring of potable water supplies and hydroelectric dams, and to discharge water if levels are too high, he explained.

“People have learned to protect themselves and to be aware. There were no deaths [from Hurricane Felix in Honduras], and that shows we are better off now than when we had to face the impacts of Hurricane Mitch,” Kawas said.

When Mitch thrashed Central America in Oct '98, an estimated 7,000 people died in Honduras and more than 3,000 in Nicaragua. As a result of the disaster, both countries were set back an estimated 20 years in terms of infrastructure and development.

In the neighborhoods where the city government was not able to clean out the sewage drains to prevent flooding, the residents organized to do it themselves.

President Manuel Zelaya pointed to the evacuation of 25,000 people in less than a day in preparation for Hurricane Felix as a success story.

The early warning system made evacuation possible in four of the country's 18 departments, mostly in the region of Mosquitia along the Caribbean coast, as well as in areas along the Nicaraguan border hit by Felix, such as Puerto Cabezas and Cabo Gracias a Dios.

The Mosquitia region is a vast coastal area shared by Honduras and Nicaragua, and the forest-covered mountains of the two countries contributed to the weakening of Hurricane Felix, which made landfall in Nicaragua on 4 Sep as a maximum strength hurricane. However, it did not cause severe damages in Honduras, according to government officials and environmentalists.

The hurricane hit one of the most densely forested zones of Central America. "We were saved by a stroke of luck, because if that hurricane had hit somewhere else, it would've destroyed us," commented biologist and university professor Mirna Marín.

Though no Hondurans were killed by Felix, in Nicaragua the 160 mile-an-hour winds and heavy rains killed at least 71 people, 150 disappeared and 150,000 were left homeless.

In Marín's opinion, Honduras today is just as vulnerable as it was after Mitch hit almost a decade ago. "People returned to live near the rivers and in flood zones, and there is no government policy to prevent those actions," she said.

"Deforestation of watersheds and mountains continues, without stopping to think about their importance in threatening situations like the one we just faced," she said. Forests play an important role in the ability of soil to absorb rain.

Although the storm devastated coastal communities, authorities were crediting the forests and mangrove swamps for slowing it down and lessening the human toll.

"The forests are obstacles for the advance of hurricanes," said President Zelaya. "The trees secure the ground and offer a buffer from the storms," said the Rev. José Andrés Tamayo, a Roman Catholic priest and leading Honduran environmental advocate.

### **Moderate Quake Rattles Honduras**

A moderate earthquake rattled a large part of the country on 15 Sep, Independence Day, sending panicked residents into the streets. As of 17 Sep, Honduran authorities had reported at least 18 persons injured, 373 houses destroyed and 306 buildings damaged due to the main quake and 14 aftershocks.

The initial quake, which had a magnitude of 5.5 on the Richter Scale, struck at 11:59 a.m. and was centered about 100 km north of the capital of Tegucigalpa, the US Geological Survey reported.

"The movement was felt in almost all of the national territory," said Carlos González, a regional director of COPECO. He reported that it was felt the strongest in the town of Luquique, located about 160 km north of Tegucigalpa in the department of Yoro, where alarmed residents ran outside for safety. He said there were reports of an estimated 50-100 damaged houses and churches, and firefighters were sent to assess the damage and to provide any needed emergency assistance. Many of the houses and commercial buildings are made of adobe with roofs of Spanish tile.

Two of the most seriously damaged buildings in Luquique were the Spanish Colonial Roman Catholic Church and Franciscan Covent, located on the Central Plaza, where many community members and school children had gathered to celebrate Independence Day.

The nearby communities of Las Cruces, Los Planes and Los Achotes also were strongly shaken by the main quake and the aftershocks, but due to their remote mountain locations and the difficulty of access The population of these remote communities is composed of Ladinos (descendents of the Spanish colonists) and Xicaque Indians.

### **The Ancient Xicaque Indigenous People**

The Xicaque (Tolpan, Jicaque) are located in the mountainous central region of the departments of Yoro and Francisco Morazán, and do not exceed 15,000 members.

Although their communities occupy well-defined areas, not all are territorially adjacent and they have been widely penetrated by the Ladino population through intermarriage. Xicaque identity is rooted in possession of tribal lands. Only one community has retained its original Tol language, in Montaña de la Flor, Francisco Morazán. Their wealth lies in the pine forests, but they are deeply submerged in poverty, with the lumber business representing little more than a source of corruption.

The families do not receive remittances from abroad. Alone, they have very little capacity to influence the State; their only impact comes from an image created by others that is based on their hunger and miseries. They lack the intelligentsia that could rescue their historic memory and have no communities or networks in the main cities.

The Xicaque do have a departmental level of organization, known as the Federation of the Xicaque Tribes of Yoro (FETRIXY), which is not free of bureaucracy and corruption. FETRIXY can only engage in pro-active advocacy with the State when it joins forces with the Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras (CONPAH), the organization that has represented all Indigenous groups at the national level since acquiring legal status in '94.

Some leaders of Honduras' pan-ethnic movement have lacked an Indigenous cultural consciousness, however, focusing their activities on motivating the Indigenous peoples to participate in marches to the capital and hunger strikes mainly around land claims.

They have been backed up by the International Labor Movement's Convention 169, of '89, a legal instrument on Indigenous rights approved by the Honduran government at a moment when neoliberal laws had brought the agrarian reform to a standstill. This convention has helped strengthen the land struggle of the Xicaque tribes, which have been invaded by cattle ranchers despite the land titles they still possess.

International cooperation supported the Indigenous movement in '92 around the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of America, and again the next year, declared the Year of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations. The communities lack the economic capacity to maintain an organization capable of sustaining the movement, or to carry out national protests such as the marches, even given the austerity and stoic endurance of the people who have participated in them. Compared with Honduras' other Indigenous groups, such as the Lenca, the Xicaque have not participated much in these protests.

—Clifton L. Holland

