

MESOAMERICA

Volume 25, Number 9, September 2007



NICARAGUA

Hurricane Felix Wrecks Havoc

The full extent of the devastation caused by Hurricane Felix, which tore across the northern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua as a Category 5 storm on 4 Sep, may never be known.

Insufficient evacuations and preparedness took a massive toll on the mostly Miskito and Sumo Indigenous populations, killing at least 67 people and disappearing another 138, according to the latest government figures. The chance of those who are missing being found alive and well continues to dim.

The material damage also was massive, and is already being likened to Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed New Orleans and surrounding areas in '05. Some 80% of the homes and buildings were left without roofs or destroyed completely, leaving more than 100,000 people in the region homeless.

A week after the storm hit, rescue workers were still trying to reach some of the most isolated Indigenous communities in the northernmost tip of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN). Some communities, such as Sandy Bay and those located in the Miskito Cays in the Caribbean Sea, were virtually wiped off the map.

Thanks to the availability of nine helicopters loaned by the US and Venezuela, rescue and relief missions ran almost constantly during the first week after the storm, and 135 people managed to be rescued. On 7 Sep, the Nicaraguan Navy managed to pull 41 survivors out of the sea after four days afloat on debris. Many of the lobster fisherman told rescue workers that they managed to stay alive by tying rope around their arms to floating pieces of wood from destroyed homes and boats. Many had rope burns up and down their arms when they were finally rescued and brought to port at Bilwi.

Subsequent naval rescue missions on 8-9 Sep only turned up floating corpses, some of which washed ashore in northeastern Honduras. When the storm first hit around 5:30 a.m. on 4 Sep, many of the communities had not been evacuated or people decided to remain in their homes, more fearful of losing everything they own to looters than to Mother Nature.

The storm was more ferocious than originally predicted and leveled most of the simple wooden homes that house most of the Indigenous population. Houses made of cement block were left standing like skeletons after the winds ripped off their roofs.

Those who did go to the shelters were not much better off. School building and churches where people huddled together were all but destroyed, with roofs and walls ripped off. The hospital roof in Puerto Cabezas was ripped off, leaving patients laying in their beds and staring up at the storm in the rain. Even the strongest building in the region, the regional council government building of the RAAN, had its roof torn off.

With international aid flowing into the country from the US, Canada, Spain, Venezuela and other Latin American countries, the government of President Daniel Ortega on 11 Sep asked the legislative National Assembly to authorize an emergency relief budget of \$10.7 million to attend to the immediate needs of victims in the region.

President Ortega, who returned home early from a trip to Panama to direct hurricane relief efforts, traveled to the devastated region two days after the storm and patrolled the area where the coastal community of Sandy Bay had once stood. Aerial shots from the helicopter over Sandy Bay showed that most of the trees had been knocked down by the wind, all lying in the same direction like an eerie scene out of a movie about an alien attack.

Ortega walked through the community, stepping over felled trees and building debris, while trying to comfort hysterical women who screamed and sobbed in the Miskito language. Ortega promised the community that “if you lost your roof, we are going to rebuild your roof; if you lost your house, we will rebuild your house.”

Delivering on those promises will be difficult, though, in a country with few resources and with only a partially developed image of the hurricane’s destruction.

Rosario Murillo, the First Lady and official government spokeswoman, assured hurricane victims that the government, simultaneous to its rescue work, was already planning how to rebuild.

While the government has stressed that the RAAN’s regional autonomy will be respected in the relief and reconstruction efforts, Murillo said that it was not the administration’s intention to return “life to normal” on the Caribbean coast.

“We can’t talk only of returning to the normalcy that you had, because it was a normalcy of injustice and poverty,” Murillo told the devastated Miskito community of Dakura during a 7 Sep visit. “We have to propose, as we have done in all of Nicaragua, a development with prosperity, well-being and in accordance with the cultures and traditions.”

US Aid Requested to Fight Drug-Trafficking

President Ortega said that the governments of Central America have asked the US to provide \$1 billion in assistance over the next five years to fight drug trafficking in the region.

Ortega, who has criticized US foreign aid in recent weeks, said the proposal was made last month by Foreign Minister Samuel Santos to the US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Thomas Shannon.

Organized crime and drug trafficking are “extremely dangerous enemies,” Ortega said. Also, Ortega, in past weeks, has warned his police and military to be careful with the US DEA, warning that they have a secret agenda.

Ortega's military chief, Gen. Omar Hallenslevens, also has made public statements in recent weeks saying that the Nicaragua Armed Forces need planes and helicopters to do its job properly and to combat narco-trafficking. Hallenslevens has said that Nicaragua will take help from wherever it can get it.

“Let [the US] send us boats, helicopters, tanks and planes like they sent Honduras, and then we will be willing to cooperate with the United States in a serious manner and with respect for the sovereignty of Nicaragua,” Ortega said.

The US diplomatic mission here has touted the aid it gives Nicaragua, and said it has no plans to establish a military base here.

Slick Government Takeover of Esso Facility

The Ortega government rattled the nerves of some foreign investors last month by seizing oil-tanker storage facilities owned by Esso, the Nicaraguan subsidiary of ExxonMobil, allegedly for not paying its due taxes.

The “preventive embargo” of the Esso facility took place on 17 Aug, when armed men took over the oil storage facility near the Port of Corinto. Esso representatives insist that it does not owe any back taxes, and several of the private business leaders warned that the takeover was illegal.

During the embargo, the government authorized state-owned petroleum company Petronic to use the Esso facility to unload several Venezuelan oil tankers, an action that led many to believe that the real motive for the takeover was to pressure the US-oil affiliate into business with Venezuela's state oil company, which it has previously refused to do.

Nicaragua is in the middle of a grinding energy crisis, facing 4-8 hour daily blackouts around the country. Esso, according to most accounts, both government and private, has done little to help the situation. When the Ortega government reportedly approached Esso late last year and asked if it would be willing to handle the discounted Venezuelan oil, Esso executives said no.

That situation put Nicaragua in a fix. Despite being promised virtually limitless Venezuelan oil, the Nicaraguan government does not have the facilities to store, process or distribute the oil. Some observers think that the government's argument that it is going after Esso for alleged back taxes is a way to pressure the company into “reconsidering” its original offer.

Esso representatives have said that they will not negotiate and have threatened to ration petroleum here – an act that would probably result in Esso losing whatever public sympathy it might have at the moment.

—*Tim Rogers* in Nicaragua