

Cuba in 2022: Hope in the face of adversity



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Losses of dozens of human lives and billions of pesos were the balance of the impact of disasters of various kinds in the reality of Cuba in 2022, in the face of whose scenarios the solidarity of the people prevailed.

Flags flew more than once at half-mast in public squares and in the hearts of the island's inhabitants, to pay tribute to the fatal victims of disasters that became unique in the recent history of the country due to the negative records they set.

Among the images of sadness and pain, there was also hope and solidarity from the hand of firefighters, rescuers, friends from other countries and thousands of people who came voluntarily to help repair the damage caused.

A WOUND IN THE HEART OF HAVANA

On May 6, 2022, a loud roar broke the daily routine in the historic center of Old Havana. While a tanker truck was unloading gas on the first floor of the Saratoga Hotel, an explosion occurred, destroying the facility and a large number of buildings in the surrounding area, leaving 46 dead and a hundred injured.

For almost a week rescuers worked in the search for those trapped in the rubble, under the hopeful gaze of a country that saw in each survivor saved a victory over death.

More than 90,000 tons of debris were removed as a result of the disaster, which changed the landscape of a busy corner of the capital and the lives of the victims' families and friends.

The losses were valued at millions of dollars. The five-star hotel, where music and art stars had stayed overnight, is still recovering, as are several residential buildings whose inhabitants were moved to temporary housing.

According to historians, this was one of the deadliest man-made disasters in Cuba in recent decades.

HELL ON EARTH

Cuba is one of the countries where more lightning strikes are reported, as well as deaths and accidents associated with them. It is a curiosity, given the size of the island, but the night of August 5, 2022 was the beginning of one of the country's most impressive tragedies of natural origin.

One of the fuel reservoirs of the supertanker base in Matanzas Bay, in the west of the nation, was struck by lightning, which caused a fire that quickly spread to other tanks, causing explosions and rivers of fire and ash. As a result of the incident, 17 people died, most of them firefighters killed in the line of duty, and more than a hundred were injured. The fire destroyed the infrastructure of one of the nation's largest and most modern fuel storage facilities.

For five days, billions of cubic liters of water were poured by land, air and sea, while the sky of the so-called City of Bridges of Cuba was blackened by the gases and ash produced by the combustion.

Experts from Mexico and Venezuela came to support the work of Cuban firefighters and rescuers, whose action, according to specialists, was a human feat.

The remains of the deceased were located, but never identified, due to the high temperatures to which they were exposed; this did not prevent the whole town from paying an emotional tribute to them at the first museum dedicated to firefighters in Cuba, in the city of Matanzas.

With the help of Venezuela, the Matanzas supertanker base is currently being recovered, whose project takes into account the causes of the event to mitigate the possible impact of another lightning strike, one of the most destructive natural phenomena.

The victims have received government support to recover their homes and belongings, while environmental authorities carried out three inspections, the results of which did not report any damage to the bay, nor to groundwater or crops.

HURRICANE IAN

In 2022, experts predicted an active cyclonic season for Cuba, with a high probability that a hurricane of great intensity would impact the national geography with its winds, rains and sea penetrations.

On September 27, the forecasts turned into certainty and then into tension and anguish for the inhabitants of the western part of the country, including the capital, when the trajectory cone of hurricane Ian, category three on the Saffir-Simpson scale, confirmed its imminent impact.

Winds of more than 185 kilometers per hour, torrential rains and the inrush of the sea wreaked havoc on the economy, nature and the livelihoods of millions of people. The instability provoked in the national electric power system caused it to go into an exceptional situation and collapse for several days.

Government sources confirmed the death of three people, the affectation of more than 100 thousand houses and important damages in the electric, communications and agricultural infrastructure, in the latter fundamentally in the cultivation of tobacco, of which Pinar del Río is a world reference.

The island is going through a difficult economic situation due to the intensification of the U.S. blockade and the post-Covid-19 pandemic crisis, so the recovery strategy took into account the promotion of local development solutions.

Although the electricity, water and communications networks have already been restored, it will take a little longer to rebuild the collapsed houses and recover the productive infrastructure.

However, no one was left abandoned and after the natural hurricane, another human being has arrived from all corners of the country to the most remote regions of the west with donations, resources, artistic presentations and hands ready to clean, clear, support and build.

IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, HOPE

Despite their diversity, the disasters that occurred in Cuba in 2022 have several common elements.

The institutional organization of the country and the basic services developed by the Cuban Revolution allowed not only to face these situations, but also to mitigate them, recover and incorporate the lessons learned.

At every moment, from the first minutes, the highest authorities of the country went to the scene of the events and talked with the population and specialists to take the measures that were closest to reality. Also decisive in this action was the solidarity of the citizens and friends who showed that Cuba is not alone.

At the opposite extreme were the various disinformation campaigns organized from abroad by the enemies of the process of socioeconomic transformations in Cuba, especially in social networks, with the aim of defaming the government's management and sowing chaos.

All destabilizing attempts failed because with the same natural force of the explosions, thunderstorms and hurricanes that caused the destruction, the country began to recover with what it had learned, responding to adversity with solidarity.

Source: José Armando Fernández Salazar, Prensa Latina Journalist

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