

Landslide Tragedy -- Another Pain for a Hurt Guatemala



An avalanche of mud has buried over 120 family huts on the outskirts of Guatemala City, an event that could become one of the worst tragedies in that Central American nation, where tens of thousands of people are forced to live in misery in high risk areas lacking all basic services.

Rescue teams have so far recovered 130 bodies but the total is constantly growing since there are 500 persons still missing after the mud slid down hill and buried hundreds of miserable huts that precariously clung to the mountain side.

No exact number of these precarious human settlements is available in Guatemala, but the National Coordinating Office for Disaster Reduction estimates that there are at least six hundred in the capital city alone, an area surrounded by hills and mountains whose wooded areas have progressively disappeared to be replaced by shabby huts built with all sorts of discarded materials to which ladders cling, constantly defying disaster.

The common denominator of these areas is danger, due to the lack of basic services, such as paved roads, running water, sanitation and, electricity. The children have no schools and the infirm no health clinics.

At the beginning of June, when the rainy season came into full force, what emergency services there are counted not less than sixty thousand victims of flooding and mud slides.

Even though some have dared to blame nature for this tragedy, the true causes lie elsewhere: to begin with, the indolence of the authorities entrusted with guaranteeing the life and security of the inhabitants.

Also, widespread corruption and social inequalities blatant in a country rich in resources which only a handful can fully enjoy, are some other causes of this tragedy, rooted in the deep misery afflicting most of the Guatemalan population.

This most recent tragedy has given the reason to those most pessimistic about this tragic situation but also confirms the demands of those who in Guatemala that favor a deep restructuring of the Government which they say should be geared to the protection of the population.

It is galling –many Guatemalans ask—that in a nation where tens of thousands of children and the aged live in risk for twenty four hours of each day, the President and his Lady Deputy could lead a ring that defrauded millions of dollars of Government money.

What, they ask, are the rest of the nation's officials doing in a country where misery grows every year instead of decreases. How many additional murderous mud slides are needed in Guatemala to shake up the consciences of the ruling class and a change for the better is achieved in that Central American nation?

In the months before the 6th of September election in Guatemala, the La Linea corruption case involving high-ranking officials of the outgoing administration, including President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti, was made public by the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala.

Baldetti resigned in May and was arrested on fraud charges in August. More than a dozen ministers and deputy ministers as well as a number of government officials were forced to resign. Less than a week before the election, President Pérez was also stripped of his immunity, resigned and was arrested.

Alejandro Maldonado Aguirre acts as head of state until a new president is sworn into office. The scandal has diminished many Guatemalans trust in the political elite even further. Some of the participants of mass protests against corruption demanded a postponement of the election due to the crisis and claims of irregularities.

But the fact is that the Government structures that allowed them to plunder the national resources at will are still intact.

Profound changes are needed in Guatemala: the National Congress, for instance, must be cleared of thieves and corrupt officials.

As Pope Francisco said in Havana, the Government officials must take office to serve the people and not to serve themselves.

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