

Landslide in Guatemala leaves hundreds dead and missing

By Clodomiro Puentes
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At least 280 have been killed and 350 missing in a landslide in Guatemala earlier this month, making it one of the deadliest to afflict the Central American country. Also, 125 homes were destroyed or damaged in the event. The disaster occurred October 1 after heavy rains in the settlement of El Cambray II, located in Santa Catarina Pinula, a municipality just 15 kilometers southeast of the capital, Guatemala City. The settlement is placed at the foot of steep hillsides and looks precariously over the Pinula river.

In the midst of rescue efforts, the municipal government of Santa Catarina sought to underreport the number of missing as a result of the landslide. Rescue efforts were called off on October 10, with authorities citing safety concerns over the shifting and unstable soil conditions in the area.

The settlement has been declared uninhabitable, and its surviving former residents settled in shelters. It now lies entombed in mud, rock and debris, in many places as thick as 12 meters.

Conred, the National Coordination for Disaster Reduction, had raised concerns about the El Cambray II since 2008 and had designated El Cambray II a high risk settlement in a November 2014 report.

According to Conred, it urged the municipal government of Santa Catalina to take measures to notify those living there to relocate on account of the risk involved. However, it claims the majority of the inhabitants disregarded the warning.

Already in 2014, the swelling of the river had undermined many of the houses. Indeed, Conred's 2014 report also urged that the municipality take immediate efforts to research a number of solutions, including resettling the community wholly or in part, the implementation of a program to scale back or maintain the erosion of the hillsides and the

construction of works to help regulate the flow and course of the Pinula river. The river's course had altered over the years so that certain houses on the outskirts of the settlement gradually found themselves on a dangerously steep slope directly overlooking the water.

The Conred report advised "considering geological and hydro-meteorological variables, as well as structural and anthropogenic variables." This is to settle for half of an explanation. The roots of the tragedy which befell the population of El Cambray II are not to be found just in soil mechanics and civil engineering, but more fundamentally in the laws of motion of Guatemalan society.

The report, a brief twelve-page document, leaves unexamined the factors that compel impoverished layers of the population to build homes in disaster-prone areas in the first place.

While Guatemala is dotted with countless unlicensed settlements constructed on an ad-hoc basis, El Cambray II was not one of those. The municipality approved construction in the area by a real estate firm known as Proyectos Girasol, making no serious efforts to take into account the hydrological and geological characteristics under El Cambray II. Given the callous and light-minded approach by the municipal government, the green light given counted for little in terms of safety regulation or proper infrastructure for El Cambray II.

Indeed, the Conred report pointed to the utterly inadequate methods of waste disposal, as well as the highly exposed and vulnerable water mains. In addition, the inhabitants, for want of proper facilities, were forced to deposit solid wastes in and along the riverbed, all of which served to exacerbate the factors contributing to the mudslide.

This corruption and ineptitude was not unique to a particular set of officials at the municipal level in Guatemala. They are indicative of deep and thoroughgoing social dysfunction in which the Guatemalan ruling establishment is directly implicated.

The country has been rocked by mass protests which eventually forced the ouster of President Otto Perez Molina, along with members of his cabinet. The protests were motivated by a long-standing corruption scandal that uncovered a wide-ranging network of kickbacks and bribery known as La Linea.

Perez Molina himself served as a general under Efraín Ríos Montt, another former president who had more infamously prosecuted a brutal civil war which included acts of genocide against Guatemala's indigenous population.

According to the government body, the National Survey for Employment and Income (ENEI), the median income for Guatemalans falls well below the minimum wage. Much of this is a result of the size of the informal sector of the economy. For the 6.1 million Guatemalans of working age, the vast majority—over 4 million, or 66.7 percent—are employed in the informal sector, without any guarantee of stable employment, basic labor protections, access to social security, leave or benefits. It is this social layer of impoverished peasantry forced to move to the outskirts of urban centers that, lacking any viable alternative, forms precarious settlements like El Cambray II.

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