

Death toll rises from Peru's El Niño flooding

By Cesar Uco
20 March 2017

The official death toll from the intense rain and flooding that has hit the Pacific coastal zone of Peru rose to 72 Sunday, with an estimated 115,000 homes destroyed and over 100 bridges washed out.

The natural disaster, caused by the “El Niño” phenomenon caused by a sudden rise in ocean temperatures, has exposed the inability of the Peruvian government to either prepare for or properly respond to increasingly frequent climatic catastrophes, leaving the poorer and rural Peruvians to their fate.

From Tumbes on the border with Ecuador to Arequipa, the largest city in southern Peru, incessant heavy, tropical rain returned this week to flood cities and destroy tens of thousands of arable hectares.

According to the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, in addition to the death toll, at least 72 people were injured, with 11 missing and police searching for survivors in many areas, including villages that had been cut off by rising waters. The Civil Defense Institute (Indeci) stated that more than half a million people have been affected by the flooding, while Peru's roads have been cut off by avalanches resulting from the excessive accumulation of water in the Andes.

Due to the rapidly rising water, beginning on Wednesday March 15, the Rímac and Huaycoloro rivers flooded as they passed through the capital city of Peru, Lima. Luis Castañeda, mayor of Lima Metropolitana, ordered the closure of all schools and cut off the drinking water supply in 27 districts of the city beginning on Thursday. Tens of thousands of *Limeños* joined long lines at the markets to stock up on food, especially bottled water, anticipating further flooding and avalanches that could leave them isolated for several days.

Due to the pandemonium created by the threat of floods and avalanches, public transportation was extended in Lima until the early hours of the morning. However, there were places in the city that buses could

not access.

Castañeda asked the President of Peru, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK), to declare a state of emergency and allow “a strong recovery of infrastructure because that means sources of work,” according to *El Comercio*. He added: “I hope the government gives us an emergency law so that all provinces and districts can respond quickly to this aggression of nature.”

According to Castañeda, the president declined his request, and instead answered by asking him to close the portion of the Pan-American Highway that goes around the city of Lima, connecting the north with the south of the country, but the mayor refused to do.

PPK asked the public to have faith in facing what he called an unexpected “Biblical Flood” that occurs every “50 years.” The rains, added the head of state, “are causing flooding, roadblocks, bridge collapses and many bad things.” He said the problem was not a shortage of money, but a mismanagement of resources.

Prime Minister Fernando Zavala told *La República* that 800 million nuevos soles (US\$ 245 million) had been allocated to deal with the damage in the north, the country's most affected area.

Peru's north coast, especially the department of Piura, has been the hardest hit. The sewers of the city of the same name were not good enough to filter the waters. The population defended itself by piling up sacks of sand. Gorges turned into deadly avalanches of mud, logs and stones.

During the week, the flood reached the Plaza de Armas in the center of the city of Piura. According to *El Comercio*, the water “leaked through several floodgates” until reaching the Plaza de Armas, flooding streets, homes and commercial premises.

According to COER (Regional Emergency Operations Center) in Piura, the rains and overflows of the Piura and Chira rivers left 191,930 affected. Education will be disrupted for a long time as the

floods have left 177 schools unusable.

The rivers Tumbes and Zarumilla overflowed into the city of Tumbes. So far 1,500 hectares of rice and 1,650 of organic bananas, plus 120 of fruit trees have been inundated by the rains.

COER Tumbes reports that 400 meters of irrigation canals have disappeared. The total number of affected in the city is reported at 13,000. Two people have died: one child drowned in the river Tumbes and one adult in Papayal. Access routes have been interrupted.

In Cajamarca, the main access route to the coast was under the water of the Jequetepeque river.

In the department of La Libertad, the historic center of the city of Trujillo was flooded, destroying some of the most beautiful cultural heritage of Peru, including three mansions, jewels of the 19th Century architecture.

In the surroundings of Lima, avalanches in Chosica, Punta Negra and the Chilca river have left buildings destroyed and people homeless. Three gorges were flooded, and the waters destroyed a children's shelter, damaged crops and blockaded the South Pan-American Highway.

The emergency situation caused by the El Niño phenomenon has led politicians to make hollow speeches on the need to invest in infrastructure.

The reality is that much of the death and destruction could have been mitigated if the governments that have ruled Peru over the past decades had placed any priority on investments in material and social infrastructure. Instead, the entire concentration has been on attracting billions of dollars in foreign capital dedicated to mining for export dollars, which go into the pockets of a tiny layer of Peruvian millionaires and their foreign counterparts.

According to data from the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM), Peru has a portfolio of 47 mining projects worth approximately US\$47 billion. Compared to this figure, the amount that Prime Minister Zavala released to rebuild the northern region—US \$246 million—amounts to 0.52 percent or 2.25 percent of the approved mining projects.

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