

Death toll from Mexico floods could reach 600; over 200,000 left homeless

by Ricardo Sandoval
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MEXICO CITY — As rescuers continue to unearth bodies after last week's tragic flooding, politicians here are facing tough questions about why they have permitted flimsy neighborhoods of tin and laminate shacks to spring up in city after city, leaving thousands of poor Mexicans vulnerable to nature's wrath.

After a week of hard rains turned dry riverbeds into torrents, hillsides stripped of trees and brush gave way and rivers rose over their banks, leaving whole cities and rural valleys throughout southeastern Mexico under water and mud.

Unconfirmed reports say the death toll could reach 600. More than 200,000 people remain homeless, and dozens of roads and bridges are closed. Rain from a new band of storm clouds fell Monday in southern Mexico, further threatening towns along the Pacific coast.

The disaster ranks as one of the worst in decades for a country still reeling from a major earthquake earlier this month and disastrous flooding in 1997 and 1998 — events that killed 1,500 and crippled several cities.

Mexican officials face a possible political disaster, too. Opposition politicians and engineering experts say enough is enough, and that poor and working-class Mexicans must no longer be allowed to homestead in floodplains and on unprotected hillsides.

"This is not new," said Estrella Vasquez, a congresswoman from the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution and ranking

member of the legislature's Civil Protection Committee. "What's new is the radical increase in rain, and that's focusing attention on something politicians have allowed for decades."

After Hurricane Paulina killed at least 400 people in Acapulco in 1997, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo promised to crack down on politicians who had allowed home construction along riverbeds and

Yet homes have since been rebuilt in the same areas, and little has been done to stop such construction elsewhere.

That was the case in Teziutlan, where at least 125 bodies have been recovered from just one neighborhood buried by a mudslide last week. Many residents of that neighborhood worked for garment factories that stitch clothes for U.S. companies. It is unclear whether

Mexico's latest natural disaster. Interior Minister Diodoro Carrasco bristled at criticism of the government's presumed role in such tragedies, calling it political opportunism without "genuine concern" for people who've lost family and homes.

But it's not just the political opposition that is slamming the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party for allowing uncontrolled growth in risky zones.

"Politicians won't respond to this chronic problem until it hits them directly," said Alberto Arroyo Montes de Oca, an engineer with Grupo Roche Syntex in Mexico City.

Typically, a local political or labor union boss will encourage poor people to build homes on empty ground to enhance his power base. Around Mexico City, entire suburbs have sprung up in this fashion, denuding hillsides and filling floodplains.

Montes de Oca said the poor chase off politicians who try to evict them from dangerous zones by asking, "Where will we build instead?" It's difficult, he said, for politicians to dislodge people without any place to put them.

Congresswoman Vasquez said opposition leaders already have won approval for changes in the Mexican constitution, giving legislators more say in where housing is built and how local communities prepare for disasters. Those decisions are now in the hands of federal bureaucrats.

"My party is guilty too, but it's important to change how we look at housing to avoid yearly disasters, now that nature is hitting us hard year after year," she said.

MEXICO FLOODS AFTER TORRENTIAL RAINS



PHOTO BY EL UNIVERSAL/KRT

A man searches for bodies and belongings in Teziutlan, Mexico. The poor neighborhood in the northern mountains of Puebla was hit hard by the rain.

ecologically sensitive hillsides overlooking that Pacific coast resort city. Some low-ranking politicians were ejected from office, and others faced criminal charges.

their homes, below a cemetery high above the town, were on a legal construction site.

At a press conference to present the government's response to

Derailment damage kept to a minimum

by Douglas P. Shuit

LOS ANGELES -- With more than 200 freight trains moving in and out of Southern California each day, Saturday's 7.0 quake had the potential to paralyze traffic from one of the United States' busiest rail hubs.

Aside from derailment of the Amtrak passenger train, which caused the shutdown of a twin set of eastbound and westbound tracks, the earthquake caused relatively little disruption to rail traffic.

Union Pacific operates 110 to 120 freight trains in the Los Angeles area every day, and the Burlington, Northern, and Santa Fe Railway runs another 75 freight trains daily through its Barstow switching yard.

Union Pacific trains were halted while crews inspected tracks, then began rolling again. Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe trains faced longer delays because the disruption was caused on its main lines into and out of Los Angeles.

"We had to stop the trains for a while while we inspected the tracks, but that was all," said Mike Furtney, a spokesman for Union Pacific. Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe hoped to have repairs completed to the damaged track and trains running in both directions by early Sunday.

All of Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe's trains were put "on hold," causing substantial delays, pending inspection of the tracks, said Lena Kent, a spokeswoman for the railroad.

Heavy equipment, including a 125-ton crane, and work crews began moving to the area about eight miles west of Ludlow to repair the tracks soon after the derailment. The Amtrak cars were said to have suffered minimal damage. The crane was able to literally lift the cars up and place them down on undamaged track.

"We plan to work around the clock until we have the tracks repaired," Kent said.

Union Pacific and Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe operate a state-of-the-art computerized communications center in San Bernardino. Outfitted with sensitive seismological equipment, train system operators know immediately when there is a

major earthquake. Once a major earthquake is detected, trains are ordered to stop at once, pending an inspection of the tracks, Kent said.

Saturday's quake hit before a warning could be issued.

The relative lack of major disruption is in keeping with the generally good record railroads have of maintaining service during past California earthquakes, even as those quakes took heavy tolls on bridges and freeways. San Francisco's rapid transit rail system played a critical role moving commuters in and out of the city after the 1989 Northern California earthquake caused the collapse of the Nimitz Freeway and part of the Bay Bridge.

Southern California railroad officials said this was the first derailment they could recall that was caused by an earthquake.

Amtrak said it was forced to cancel only one other train: a passenger train scheduled to leave Los Angeles for Chicago Saturday night. An eastbound train en route to San Antonio, Texas, Saturday morning was delayed 3 hours while crews inspected tracks for damage.

Amtrak hoped to resume service to and from Chicago Sunday. Amtrak said other passenger rail lines in and out of Los Angeles continued to operate Saturday.

Four persons were injured in Saturday's Amtrak derailment, but railroad officials said the number of injuries might have been much higher had the Southwest Chief not been slowed down by a freight train running on the tracks ahead of it.

Normally, the Southwest Chief would have been running through the Mojave Desert at its allowed speed of 90 mph. But it was operating at 60 mph when the quake hit because of a Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe Railway freight train running ahead of it.

"We were very fortunate," said Amtrak spokesman Ray Lang. The violent shaking knocked 21 of the 24 cars off the tracks, including all 12 of the freight cars, many of which were carrying U.S. mail, attached to the back end of the train.

U.S. offers aid to Russia on radar site

by Steven Mufson and Bradley Graham
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON -- The Clinton administration has offered to help Russia complete a key radar site. Also it offered to share more American radar data if Russia agrees to renegotiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty so that the United States could build a national missile defense system, a senior administration official said Saturday.

In a project that would cost tens of millions of dollars, the United States would help Russia complete a partially constructed radar site near the Siberian city of Irkutsk that is oriented eastward, covering northern Asia, North Korea, and parts of the North Pole. Russia might also be given access to data from U.S. early-warning radars on the full trajectory of missile launches, and the two countries might collaborate on some satellite systems.

Together with the Senate's defeat last week of a treaty banning nuclear test explosions, the attempt to modify the 27-year-old ABM treaty is a sign of tremendous ferment in the realm of arms control.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the advent of new technology and the rise of missile threats from countries such as North Korea, Iraq and Iran are pushing Cold War-era agreements toward obsolescence. Wary of tearing up the entire quilt of agreements that took decades to negotiate, however, the Clinton administration is trying to keep Russia as a partner in the process of developing a system to shoot down incoming missiles.

"We've raised with them a number of cooperative activities to show that we see this as a threat that affects both countries," said a senior

administration official. "We don't see this as anything against Russia, and we're willing to look at a whole range of cooperative measures that would address the same rogue threat we're concerned about."

The offer, made more than a month ago and first reported in the early editions of Sunday's *New York Times*, is consistent with earlier statements the

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-A U.S. official

administration has made about finding ways to win Moscow's support for national missile defense. Such a system, administration officials say, would provide a limited defense oriented primarily toward rogue states, not Russia.

American assistance for other radar arrays in the former Soviet Union was also discussed, although the station in Mischelevka, near Irkutsk, was the only one discussed in detail.

Although the Russian government has officially rejected U.S. proposals to renegotiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, it has nonetheless agreed to listen to American ideas. The latest round of talks took place

last week, and the United States has not yet received a Russian response.

To improve the chances that the Russians will go along, the administration decided last month to ask initially for modest changes in the ABM treaty, rather than seeking wholesale revisions, as some Republicans in Congress have advocated.

U.S. negotiators are trying to convince Russian counterparts they have a common interest in guarding against rogue states that have greater and greater capabilities for launching intercontinental missiles capable of hitting either Russia or the United States. The United States believes it would benefit from Russian radar data covering countries such as Iran and North Korea, and believes it can offer valuable information in return.

"We've been doing a lot of very blue-sky thinking about what kinds of cooperation might conceivably be possible," another senior administration official said. "We've told the Russians we're prepared to be pretty far-reaching in cooperation."

The United States has given the Russians a list of several potential areas of cooperation, some of which would represent an expansion of existing programs and others of which would break new ground. In addition to completing the radar at Mischelevka, the administration has offered joint computer simulations of antimissile systems and collaboration in deploying satellite systems.

The United States also has suggested expanding the agreement reached a year ago to share data from U.S. early-warning radar stations. Another possibility, which remains a subject of intense debate inside the administration, would involve offering to help Russia regain use of a radar in Lyaki, Azerbaijan, that covers some Middle Eastern nations.

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Russians that any of these proposals might bear fruit," a U.S. official said.

The American negotiators have cited conflicts in the Muslim republics and territories along Russia's southern border as one reason why Russia should be interested in guarding against launches.

This is not the first time the United States and Russia have discussed sharing radar information. Talks about sharing data on missile launches began late in the Bush presidency. But the issue has taken on greater urgency because of American plans for moving ahead with national missile defense.

The Clinton administration has said it will decide next June whether to move ahead with the first phase of the system, which would consist of 100 missile interceptors based in Alaska. The second would involve expansion to a second site in the continental United States and a total of more than 200 interceptors.

One of Russia's concerns, according to an administration official, is the possibility the system might be expanded. At the moment, it will be a challenge for U.S. technology to intercept even a small number of missiles, and impossible to shoot down the hundreds of missiles that Russia might launch at once. Thus, the U.S. negotiators argue, the missile defense system would not decrease Russia's nuclear deterrence against the United States.

Russian negotiators, however, want assurances against a "breakout in capacity from limited to something much bigger" that would be capable of knocking down scores of missiles, the administration official said.

Bush as the 'artful dodger'

by Terry M. Neal
The Washington Post

Gov. George W. Bush's GOP rivals have found him harder to corner than Oscar De La Hoya, the boxer who lost his title belt last month after using an evasive strategy against his opponent.

Steve Forbes and Gary Bauer have been particularly vocal, accusing Bush of ducking the competition. The Bush campaign had resisted any plans to put their guy on the same stage as his Republican opponents until mid-January in Iowa, just days before the nominating contests begin. But this past week, Bush reversed course and announced that he would attend a Dec. 2 candidates forum sponsored by WMUR-TV in Manchester, N.H.

Still, Bush will skip forums in New Hampshire this Friday and next Friday. But he won't be skipping New Hampshire. He will campaign there at week's end -- that is, until the night of the debate, when he will dip over to Vermont for a campaign fund-raiser.

"Governor Bush's decision to duck debates in New Hampshire this month is wrong," Forbes said. "Is Governor Bush afraid the American people will find out what each candidate stands for? 'Don't ask, don't tell' is no way to run a presidential campaign. The American people deserve better."

Bush's reluctance to debate hasn't hurt him much with New Hampshire voters. But it hasn't helped him either. A Zogby International poll puts his support at 40 percent in the state, about where it has been for months. The big mover is Arizona Sen. John McCain,

whose support has steadily risen. He is in second place, with 21 percent, followed by Forbes at 12 percent and Elizabeth Dole at 7 percent.

McCain spokesman Todd Harris credited McCain's extensive retail politicking -- in the past eight months, he has spent 28 days campaigning in the state -- for his improved showing.

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-Steve Forbes
presidential candidate

Bush spokeswoman Mindy Tucker said criticism from Bush's rivals had nothing to do with his decision to attend the December forum. "The governor has said all along that he was looking forward to debating," she said. "The primaries are moving earlier and earlier, and we wanted to make sure there was ample time for voters to see the candidates in debates."