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CENTRAL AMERICA: Disaster management is key challenge

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Abstract

Disaster preparedness in Central America.

In recent months, Central American countries have been boosting regional cooperation for the enhancement of security strategies in response to the increase in child migration through the region en route to the United States. Less high-profile regional efforts are also being made in the area of emergency preparedness in this disaster-prone region.

Full Text

SUBJECT: Disaster preparedness in Central America.

SIGNIFICANCE: In recent months, Central American countries have been boosting regional cooperation for the enhancement of security strategies in response to the increase in child migration through the region en route to the United States. Less high-profile regional efforts are also being made in the area of emergency preparedness in this disaster-prone region.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

The United States will continue to support training exercises, as natural disasters increase regional vulnerability, thus driving migration.

Long-term urban planning will remain a key factor in the reduction of the impact of natural disasters in the region.

Costa Rica and Panama face fewer disaster risks but will continue to play an important role in coordinating emergency-related agencies.

Central America's geology makes it prone to frequent earthquakes and occasional volcanic eruptions. In addition, the hurricane season between June and November often brings major damage, including tropical storms, flooding and landslides. These natural events can carry a considerable cost in terms of lives lost, damage to crops and infrastructure.

Hurricanes.

While the 2014 hurricane season was relatively subdued, with no major hurricanes hitting the region, they have caused significant damage in previous years:

In 2013, Tropical Storm Barry hit the region between southern Mexico and northern Nicaragua. Major flooding took place in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Belize, leading to several thousand being displaced, prolonged power cuts and six casualties.

Also in 2013, Hurricane Barbara affected El Salvador, Guatemala and southern Mexico, killing six people. Material damage was estimated at 1 billion dollars.

The southern isthmus countries of Panama and Costa Rica tend to be less affected by hurricanes, but suffered damage during hurricanes in 2009 and 2011, with important property damage.

Earthquakes .

Earthquakes caused major damage in 2014:

Nicaragua suffered earthquakes in April and October, with widespread damage to property and casualties.

Guatemala and Mexico experienced a major earthquake along their border in July. The quake was felt as far north as Mexico City and as far south as El Salvador. Guatemala reported 53,300 people affected in seven departments, 4,600 houses damaged and one casualty. In Mexico, there were 45,000 people affected in Chiapas state and 9,000 homes damaged (see GUATEMALA: Local opposition, disasters hit investment - July 14, 2014).

Floods.

The region as a whole is prone to major flooding. In 2008, heavy rainfall linked to tropical storms led to flooding from southern Mexico to Costa Rica, causing an estimated 230 million dollars in damage and 93 casualties. Honduras suffered particularly badly, with nearly 50% of roads affected and more than 10,000 homes damaged.

Volcanic eruptions.

In 2010 and 2014, eruptions of Guatemala's Pacaya volcano triggered massive evacuation procedures and disrupted air traffic as the capital and other major cities were covered in ash. In 2010, the initial eruption damaged 800 homes and caused one casualty.

Preparedness.

The frequency and scope of these natural disasters means that Central American countries have had to dedicate resources to various aspects of disaster preparedness.

Monitoring.

The development of an early warning system for hurricanes and tropical storms is a crucial tool to allow evacuation of vulnerable communities. International agencies have provided funding for early warning systems intended to benefit the entire region, such as the establishment in 2009 of an Early Warning System for Central America, created in El Salvador by the World Food Programme.

Central America is also heavily dependent on the meteorological expertise of the US-based National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the US National Hurricane Center, both of which utilise data from stations in Central America to map the likely path of storms and hurricanes.

Humanitarian response.

Central American countries are also funding programmes to address the civilian impact of such disasters, including internal displacement, loss of livelihood and injury. International agencies have assisted with these initiatives.

Between 1994 and 2013, the European Commission allocated 199 million euros (241.7 million dollars) in humanitarian aid to Central America. Much of this has been directed through the Disaster Preparedness Programme of the Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civilian Protection Department, which focuses on educating communities about awareness and preparation, and improving infrastructure to resist natural disasters.

Military response.

In Central American countries the military is the primary institution responsible for disaster response evacuation and provision of humanitarian aid, in coordination with civilian agencies. In Panama and Costa Rica, which have no armed forces, police forces and border guard take this responsibility.

Security forces are also responsible for ensuring security in the wake of natural disasters, with the property damage and displacement creating opportunities for theft, looting and violence. This is particularly the case in Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), where levels of violence are high and tend to spike sharply in times when the security forces are confronted with natural disasters (see CENTRAL AMERICA: Gangs are regional security challenge - July 2, 2014).

Regional coordination.

While many of these efforts are coordinated by international agencies through their regional programmes, there have been limited moves by Central American countries themselves to institute region-wide preparedness programmes.

The main mechanism governing regional disaster response is the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America, which is part of SICA, the Central American Integration System which groups Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic (see CENTRAL AMERICA: Economic integration shows progress - March 28, 2014).

CEPRENAC is responsible for coordinating the response of state agencies to natural disasters and addressing cross-border issues, such as displacement of affected communities, damage in border areas and monitoring and notification. It also provides training for first response agencies across the region. Its most recent policy framework was produced in 2010 and took as its baseline scenario Hurricane Mitch (1998), one of the most destructive hurricanes on record.

Outlook.

Pending the creation of a regional response force, military responses to disasters will still be carried out on a national basis. The lack of a strong regional approach will continue to cripple efforts to improve disaster preparedness strategies (see PROSPECTS 2015: Central America - November 27, 2014)

The United States is spearheading a series of training exercises in which Central American militaries participate in preparation for natural disasters. Ongoing US and EU financial and logistical support will be crucial to strengthen regional initiatives.

CONCLUSION: Poorer Central American countries with high public deficits will struggle to direct sufficient funding towards disaster preparedness strategies and reconstruction programmes, leaving them dependent on international aid. Enhanced diplomatic and military efforts will continue to highlight the importance of joint emergency strategies.

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