

# Country Braces for Hurricane Season

By Sam Jacoby

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MANAGUA – While last year offered some respite from the relentless storm activity that battered Nicaragua in recent years, this storm season is predicted to continue the pummeling seen in 2005, which brought a record-setting 15 hurricanes and 28 named storms. Though this season's forecast is somewhat milder, it is hardly reassuring to many who live in areas prone to extreme weather.

"This year will be a very active one," forecasts Mauricio Rosales, general director of meteorology for the Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies (INETER). "We anticipate nine hurricanes, including five intense Category 3, 4 and 5 storms."

The North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions (RAAN and RAAS, respectively) were pounded last week by five consecutive storms, which flooded rivers and roads and damaged some bridges and homes. Seven hundred people were evacuated to temporary shelters, though no one was reported dead or missing.

Last week's storms could be an ominous warning of what's to come this year.

In all, there are projected to be 17 "named storms," meaning they will be large enough to be assigned a name by the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida. And so far, that prediction appears to be on the mark.

The 2007 hurricane season has begun surprisingly early, Rosales noted, with sub-tropical storm Andrea forming off of the eastern coast of the United States in early May. That was nearly three weeks before the official start of hurricane season, which runs from June 1 through the end of November.

Once the season did get under way last month, it showed no hesitation in flexing its muscles.

Early June saw simultaneous tropical storms in the Atlantic and the Pacific: Barry, which formed some 200 miles southeast of Florida, and Barbara, off the Pacific coast of southern Mexico.

Though neither directly threatened Nicaragua, Barbara caused heavy rainfall in the northwestern departments of León and Chinandega, forcing the evacuation of several hundred people and leaving some municipalities without power or potable water for several days.

Experts claim those hurricanes were an inauspicious start to a storm season that has yet to crank into full gear.

"Thirty percent of the storms we see in Nicaragua arrive in September, and another 25% in October," Morales noted.

Hurricane Mitch, which devastated Central America in 1998, did not make landfall until the tail end of this window, when it tore into Honduras in late October, and then hovered there for several days.

Though Mitch never formally entered Nicaragua, its 100-mile-wide rain system flooded large swaths of the country, leading to a massive mudslide that buried several thousand people on the side of Chinandega's Casita Volcano.

While such sudden catastrophes may be near impossible to anticipate, Rosales hopes that better prediction and alert systems will warn people earlier.

"We have notified the Civil Defense and the National System of Disaster Prevention, Mitigation and Response (SINAPRED) about the elevated activity this season, and we will keep them updated as we monitor storms in the area," he said. "When there is a storm in the Caribbean, we send out updates every six to 12 hours."

SINAPRED was formed in 2000, partly in reaction to Hurricane Mitch, and is charged



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**Fun in Doses:** A young boy in the Caribbean fishing town of Prinzapolka enjoys a brief rain shower, but coastal towns like his are vulnerable to flooding and hurricane damage.

with planning and coordinating care in the event of a similar emergency.

Working with INETER and the Civil Defense's new Center of Disaster Operations (CODE), a comprehensive response-system has been organized, though it remains untested.

Because hurricanes typically form in the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico and then travel westward, they come ashore on the less densely populated east coast of Nicaragua. Hurricane Beta, the last major hurricane to hit here Oct. 30, 2005, made unexpected landfall with 115-mile-per-hour winds in the remote southern Caribbean region of Sandy Bay, 80 miles south of its predicted impact point.

Although several hundred homes were

destroyed, the small village was able to evacuate quickly and no deaths were reported (NT, Nov. 4, 2005).

Of the 25 largest cities in the country, SINAPRED lists only two as under direct threat of hurricanes, the two regional capitals of the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions, Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields, respectively.

To reach the densely settled León-Managua-Granada corridor on the Pacific coast, a hurricane must travel across the entire country, losing its strength over the sparsely populated central hinterlands.

Of the 15 hurricanes to make landfall in Nicaragua between 1892 and 1998, all arrived from the east, and all were downgraded to tropical storms within 60 miles of traveling inland. ■

## Massive Turnout for Sandinistas' July 19 Rally



**Packing the Plaza:** Hundreds of thousands of Sandinista faithful from around the country turned out July 19 at Managua's Plaza de la Fe to celebrate the 28th anniversary of the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. The celebration featured music, cultural acts and revolutionary speeches from President Daniel Ortega and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Also on hand were the Presidents of Honduras and Panama, as well as international delegations and representatives from dozens of other countries.

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