

Extent of Felix's Devastation Still Unfolding



Antonio Aragón | EFE

Relief Aid: Miskito residents in the devastated community of Dakura receive hurricane relief aid Saturday from a U.S. Blackhawk helicopter that finally reached the isolated village four days after it was leveled by Hurricane Felix.

By Tim Rogers and Brian Harris
The Nica Times

BILWI – As the country completed three days of national mourning this week in observance of those killed by last week's Hurricane Felix, rescue workers on the Caribbean coast continued the tireless and grim work of airlifting emergency supplies to isolated indigenous communities and trying to accurately assess damage and death tolls.

As the scope of the devastating tragedy continues to unfold, several rescue workers and outside observers compared the natural disaster to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the U.S. city of New Orleans and much of the U.S. Gulf Coast.

"For us this is an invisible Katrina," said Alejandro López, a United Nations representative of the World Food Programme in the northern hamlet of Kurkira.

As with Hurricane Katrina, not only was the scope of the destruction nearly total in many communities – with 80-90% of the population left homeless – but the government's reaction to the hurricane, both before and after it struck, has been sharply criticized as inadequate and untimely.

Insufficient evacuations and storm preparedness, and spotty information on post-disaster damage assessment, had the media and other organizations guessing about how many people had died or were left homeless by the category-5 storm.

While the opposition daily *La Prensa* led with a Sept. 8 headline claiming "at least 170 dead," rival daily *El Nuevo Diario* that day claimed a more modest 52 confirmed deaths. On the Internet, reports from other publications that day claimed anywhere from 30 to 160 dead in Nicaragua, with anywhere from 30,000-150,000 affected.

The chaotic numbers game led the government to release an urgent communiqué Sept. 8, claiming that only the Nicaraguan Army is authorized to issue any statistics, including official body count numbers.

In a somber Sunday evening address, President Daniel Ortega, who had traveled out to the Caribbean region earlier in the week to witness the damage firsthand, tried to reassert his command over the situation by having his military brass offer the official numbers to

date: 67 dead; 138 missing; 135 rescued and 150,542 affected.

Though prospects are dimming that those still missing will turn up safe or be rescued, some incredible tales of survival have started to emerge from the wreckage, including the story of one woman who gave birth as the hurricane ripped by overhead and destroyed her home.

Nicaraguan naval patrols, meanwhile, pulled 41 people from the Caribbean waters Sept. 7, four full days after the storm swept them into the water. The 40 men and one woman survived by tying themselves to pieces of wood from destroyed homes and ships they found in the water.

Showing signs of trauma and exhaustion from the ordeal, the group, mostly lobster divers, was met by a large crowd of townsfolk in Bilwi, many showing up in hopes that relatives would be on the boat. Sadly, most went away with that wish unsatisfied and realizing the chances of finding their loved ones alive was practically nil.

The same patrol boat that brought the group to shore also buried nine unidentified drowning victims on an offshore key before returning to patrols. A second rescue effort the following day found only the bodies of two more victims floating in the water, and two additional bodies were found floating in the ocean on Monday.

In neighboring Honduras, meanwhile, reports came in over the weekend of dead bodies washing ashore there.

In Bilwi and in some of the outlying communities, the sound of hammering filled the town over the weekend as some residents started to rebuild the wood structures that had been lost to the storm, while grumbling that the price of nails had tripled due to the spike in demand.

However, farther north in the Miskito community of Kurkira, which bore the full brunt of the storm, fewer buildings were left standing than were felled. One church, ripped clean of its roof, had its altar and neatly lined pews exposed naked to the sky. Some nearby homes had their four walls flattened to the ground, each wall facing a different direction.

Kurkira resident Benito Flores said that
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Citizen Councils Suffer Defeat in National Assembly

By Sam Jacoby and Tim Rogers
Nica Times Staff

The rise to power of the Ortega administration's polemic Councils of Citizen Power (CPC) appears to have been severely hampered by a legal reform to sever the groups' government ties, reducing them to party organizations without any official authority or function.

In a rare show of unity among opposition political forces, 51 lawmakers from the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) and the

Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) voted together to undermine President Daniel Ortega's plans to implement a new form of grassroots "direct democracy" in the form of citizen councils, which have already been created in thousands of neighborhoods throughout the country.

The reform to Article 11 of Law 290 states that the citizen councils are strictly civil organizations that are free to organize but cannot carry out any official state function, such as making government policies or distributing state goods.

"This is a political defeat for Ortega and

the FSLN (Sandinista Front) lawmakers," said veteran political analyst Alejandro Serrano, noting that the formation of the citizen councils has been a cornerstone of the Ortega administration. "This was the first time the opposition parties have united and the first time Ortega has lost a vote in the National Assembly."

The Sandinista Front is expected to challenge the law as unconstitutional before the Supreme Court, in which Ortega wields enormous influence. Or, President Ortega himself could veto the law.

Sandinista leadership maintains that the

citizen councils are grassroots efforts that have every right to organize and exist under the Constitution. Critics, however, argue that a Law of Citizen Participation already creates
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Hurricane Survivors Slowly Start to Rebuild

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his house had been totally destroyed and that the town's water supply was cut off. Although the first U.S. Navy Blackhawk helicopter to reach the area Saturday brought a load of much-needed tents and blankets, townsfolk said they were short of water.

The U.S. aid so far has totaled \$1 million, including eight helicopters for relief and rescue missions.

The disaster made the airstrip at Puerto Cabezas a multinational bevy of activity airlifting supplies to affected towns and hamlets. Helicopters from the U.S.S. Wasp, which abandoned exercises off the coast of Panama to aid the relief effort, landed alongside a Venezuelan Air Force C-130 Hercules that ferried donations from Managua to the region. The Nicaragua Army's Soviet-era Antonov A-26 cargo planes and U.S. Chinook helicopters, along with a Ukrainian-registered Antonov A-12 chartered for the effort by United Nations' charities also joined in the effort.

In Managua, an Airbus 319 filled with emergency supplies donated by the Canadian government arrived Sept. 7 and Cuban doctors were also reportedly deployed in the

zone. A truckload of supplies from the Costa Rican Red Cross arrived in Managua, and Spain donated relief materials. Oxfam International announced it would attend to 30,000 affected residents and the United Nations and European Union were deciding how much to give at press time.

First Lady and official government spokeswoman Rosario Murillo was in the affected region Sept. 7 and assured people that the government simultaneous to the rescue work was already planning how to rebuild. To fund those efforts, the government this week asked the National Assembly to authorize \$10.7 million for immediate relief.

"We can't talk only of returning to the normalcy that you had, because it was a normalcy of injustice and poverty," Murillo told the devastated Miskito community of Dakura during a Sept. 7 visit. "We have to propose, as we have done in all of Nicaragua, a development with prosperity, wellbeing and in accordance to the cultures and traditions."

Freelance correspondent Brian Harris reported from Bilwi and Nica Times editor Tim Rogers reported from Managua.



Antonio Aragon | EFE

Rebuilding: A Miskito resident of the community Dakura recycles nails from the hurricane wreckage to start the long processes of rebuilding.

Opposition Group Marches in Protest of Citizen Councils

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a legal framework for such organizations, and that the newly created citizen councils are really Sandinista party organizations intended to hijack civil society and undermine other forms of citizen participation and local authority (NT, Aug. 17).

Congressman Victor Hugo Tinoco, of the opposition MRS, said the Sept. 6 vote in the National Assembly does not mean the citizen councils can't continue to organize and exist; it just means that they will be limited in their function and will have no greater authority than any other civil organization.

"This is a strong blow to the authoritarian tendency and style of the Ortega government," Tinoco told The Nica Times. "We are correcting an error."

The National Assembly is scheduled to vote on 14 more bills in the coming weeks, and it remains to be seen whether the loose coalition formed to defeat the citizen councils will remain firm in voting against Ortega's Sandinistas on other legislation of national importance.

Opposition Mounting

After more than 200 days in office, opposition to the Ortega administration, which has been very slow to galvanize, appears to have found its North Star.

The streets of Masaya disappeared last Sunday under a sea of Nicaraguan flags and banners, as several thousand protesters took to the streets for the first time during the Ortega administration to protest the citizen councils.

The demonstration was organized by a civic opposition group, the Movement for Nicaragua, which is supported by a constellation of the country's conservative politicians.



Sam Jacoby | Nica Times

Opposition Mounting: Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Masaya on Sunday to protest the government's Councils of Citizen Power (CPC).

Augusto Valle, a deputy for the ALN, watched the marchers assemble before the protest began.

"The *pueblo* is coming into the streets," he said. "It's ordering Ortega to respect the law."

The lawmaker said that the march was part of a larger movement that will build as the 2011 elections approach.

"We are going to unite the country, from the Pacific to the Atlantic," Valle said. Delegations from the Caribbean coast attended the protest, including a small group of indigenous Miskito from the hurricane-ravaged northeast. Another group representing Nicaraguans living abroad joined the

march to stress the importance of bringing all Nicaraguans together.

Many claimed the Ortega administration was ignoring public opinion.

"Sixty-two percent of the people didn't vote for Ortega," said Filepi Ampei, an ALN supporter, repeating a statistic that was written on many signboards and banners. "We are a democracy, Ortega can't just be the President of the people in his party, he is the President of everyone."

Private property, investment and job-creation were recurring themes. Julio Cueda held aloft a handwritten sign, "We don't want corruption, we want investment."

"We need to create jobs," he said. "We need investment to do that. The Sandinistas haven't done anything for the people, for the poor."

Fear of the Past

Many of the marchers appeared to represent the interests of more well-to-do Nicaraguans. The specter of the 1980s, when many of the country's wealthy lost property to Sandinista seizures, loomed large over the proceedings.

Yolanda Ramírez and her mother, Pineda Cuadra, leaned in the doorway of a *pulperia*, and expressed their doubts about Ortega's policies and his friendship with leftist Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez.

"We don't want to go back to the '80s," Ramírez said, her mother nodding. "We could slide back, that's what he wants to do, he wants to take us right back."

There was a moment of lighter-hearted optimism in the morning-long march, though it came from the other side of the political spectrum. Hilario Flores, wearing a bright-red FLSN cap and a Fidel Castro T-shirt, was hustled out of a booping crowd by a phalanx of police officers.

"I just wanted to see it with my own eyes," he said apologetically. "I wanted to see what this movement was about."

Flores noted that unlike the times past of the Somoza family dictatorship, which ruled the country brutally until being ousted by the Sandinista revolution in 1979, the Ortega administration is a democracy that allows for freedom of expression.

"This is a free country," he said. "Of course they can march, they should march. It's all part of a political process."

As for why he was escorted out of the crowd by the police, Flores grinned bashfully, "I yelled, *Viva la Revolución!*" ■