

From hurricanes to drought, LatAm's volatile climate

November 21 2014, by Katell Abiven



People gather on Popoyo beach in Nicaragua on November 14, 2014

Sixteen years ago, Teodoro Acuna Zavala lost nearly everything when Hurricane Mitch ravaged his fields, pouring 10 days of torrential rains on Central America and killing more than 9,000 people.

Today, the 64-year-old farmer has been forced to the brink again, this time by the drought gripping Nicaragua—the latest natural disaster to hit

Latin America, where the weather is growing ever more volatile as the effects of climate change take hold.

"I sold a calf to survive, so I could buy corn," said Zavala as he watched his chickens peck at what was left of his corn fields in the northern village of Palacaguina.

"It's the worst (drought) ever," he said, his face craggy from years working in the sun.

"Eight days is all (the rain) we got this year."

The river that runs near his small house has been reduced to a rocky trickle.

Guillermina Inglesia, who has a small grocery store nearby, agreed it was the worst drought villagers had ever seen.

"What's worrying us is, what are we going to do now?" asked the 54-year-old woman.

"If we don't have corn and beans, we've practically got no food."

Latin America is hosting this year's UN climate conference, to be held in the Peruvian capital Lima from December 1 to 12.

Delegates from governments around the world will try to hammer out a global deal on cutting Earth-warming carbon emissions, to be ratified next year.



A donkey walks among the ruins of a church in the small Honduran town of Morolica, near the border with Nicaragua, in March 1999 after most of the town was destroyed by Hurricane Mitch

Latin America is particularly exposed to extreme weather, said Soenke Kreft, head of environmental programs at German advocacy group Germanwatch, which ranks countries according to their vulnerability to climate change.

"Latin American and Caribbean countries are on top of all ratings, especially the long-term one."

Three of the four countries worst hit by climate change from 1993 to 2013 are in Latin America, according to the group's last study, which ranked Honduras first, Haiti third and Nicaragua fourth.

It will release its latest rankings in Lima in December.

"It's basically because the area is frequently hit by hurricanes," said David Eckstein, one of the researchers on the report.

"The intensity and frequency of hurricanes have definitely increased over the last years."

'Strange things'

The World Bank warns Latin America and the Caribbean will be one of the regions "worst affected by rising temperatures," despite generating just 12.5 percent of global greenhouse gases.

"Mexico and most of Central America are getting drier, northern South America is getting wetter as well as southeast South America, but central Chile and southern Brazil are getting drier," said Rodney Martinez of the World Meteorological Organization's Commission for Climatology.



The Los Laureles dam in Honduras, which supplies drinking water for one million inhabitants of the capital Tegucigalpa, at a critically low level due to drought, on March 27, 2014

"The main evidences of [climate change](#) are the increase of extreme events" like hurricanes and droughts, he said.

For Tania Guillen, who represents Nicaragua's Humboldt Center environmental group at the climate talks, the issue hit close to home in 2014.

"This year, the entire dry corridor, from Guatemala to Honduras to Nicaragua, has been hit by drought, which will affect food production," she said.

"Then after three months of drought, the rainy season came and we had floods that killed about 30 people."

But the rain only reached part of Nicaragua, leaving others in drought and delaying the start of the key coffee harvest by a month.

"Climate change doesn't just mean rising temperatures, it means volatility. A dry year, a wet year, a cold year, a hot year," said Henry Mendoza of Cafenica, a Nicaraguan association of small-scale coffee growers.

The Humboldt Center, which is working with British charity Oxfam to study the possibility of a humanitarian aid program for drought-hit areas, warns that "strange things" have been happening to Nicaragua's climate.

They include a sharp increase in tornadoes and temperatures up to eight

degrees Celsius (14.4 degrees Fahrenheit) higher than average.

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