

Eta back to sea as Central America tallies damages and dead

November 6 2020, by Delmer Martínez and Sonia Pérez D.



A resident walking through a flooded street looks back at storm damage caused by Hurricane Eta in Planeta, Honduras, Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)

As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Mexico to Panama.

It will be days before the true toll of Eta is known. Its torrential rains battered economies already strangled by the COVID-19 pandemic, took all from those who had little and laid bare the shortcomings of governments unable to aid their citizens and pleading for international assistance.

In southern Mexico, across the border from Guatemala, 19 people died as heavy rains attributed to Eta caused mudslides and swelled streams and rivers, according to Chiapas state civil defense official Elías Morales Rodríguez.

The worst incident occurred in the mountain township of Chenalho, where 10 people were swept away by a rain-swollen stream; their bodies were later found downstream. Mexico's National Meteorological Service said Eta's "broad circulation is causing intense to torrential rains on the Yucatan peninsula and in southeastern Mexico."

In Guatemala, the first army brigade reached a massive landslide Friday morning in the central mountains where an estimated 150 homes were buried Thursday. They had not recovered any bodies yet, but said that more than 100 people were believed to be missing, the army announced. In a news conference, President Alejandro Giammattei said he believed there were at least 100 dead there in San Cristobal Verapaz, but noted that was still unconfirmed.



Residents walk past inundated vehicles in the flooded streets of Planeta, Honduras, Friday, Nov. 6, 2020, in the aftermath of Hurricane Eta. As the remnants of Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)

"The panorama is complicated in that area," he said, noting that rescuers were struggling to access the site.

Tropical Depression Eta was centered 115 miles (180 kilometers) east of Belize City. It was moving northeast at 7 mph (11 kph) and had maximum sustained winds of 35 mph (55 kph).

A week of rain spoiled crops, washed away bridges and flooded homes

across Central America. Hurricane Eta's arrival Tuesday afternoon in northeast Nicaragua followed days of drenching rain as it crawled toward shore. Its slow, meandering path north through Honduras pushed rivers over their banks and pouring into neighborhoods where families were forced onto rooftops to wait for rescue.

Wendi Munguía Figueroa, 48, and nine relatives huddled Friday morning on the corrugated metal roof of her home surrounded by brown floodwaters, but with little drinking water remaining.



A child floats on an inner tube in a flooded street in the aftermath of Hurricane Eta, in Planeta, Honduras, Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)

"We can't get off our houses' roofs because the water is up to our necks in the street," Munguía said. She managed about two hours of sleep Thursday night between the intermittent rain and damp chill.

Munguía had yet to see any rescue boats or any authorities. Her neighbors likewise occupied their roofs.

Her home in La Lima, a San Pedro Sula suburb, is 150 feet from the roiling Chamelecon river and only a short way from the international airport's runway. The neighborhood flooded in 1998 during Hurricane Mitch—a storm that killed more than 9,000 people in Central America—but Munguía said there is more water this time.

It had been raining hard since Monday even though Eta's center didn't enter Honduras until Wednesday. Anticipating flooding they had started raising appliances and other household items, but the water entered in a torrent Thursday morning.



Residents affected by Hurricane Eta stand in a line to receive donated food in Planeta, Honduras, Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)

"In 10 minutes my house filled up," she said. "We couldn't escape in any direction because everywhere was full of water."

Francisco Argeñal, chief meteorologist at the Center for Atmospheric, Oceanographic and Seismic Studies, said as much as 8 inches of rain had fallen in just the past two days in some areas.

The death toll in Honduras rose to at least 21 people Friday, confirmed by local authorities, but the country's emergency management agency reported only eight.

"We know there are a lot of dead people, we've seen them, but until we receive official information we can't certify them," explained Marvin Aparicio, head of the agency's incident command system. "In the coming hours, we are going to start to see, to our regret, Dante-esque scenes of people found dead" as floodwaters recede.

The government estimates more than 1.6 million have been affected. It said rescues were happening Friday in San Pedro Sula and La Lima, but the need was great and resources limited.



People walk around a road blocked by a landslide in Purulha, northern Guatemala Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)

"I would say the national capacity has been overwhelmed by the size of the impact we are seeing," said Maite Matheu, Honduras director for the international humanitarian organization CARE. The group was using its network of contacts in Honduras to identify the hardest-hit areas and catalogue their most-pressing needs.

Honduras Foreign Affairs minister Lisandro Rosales said via Twitter that "the destruction that Eta leaves us is enormous and public finances are at a critical moment because of COVID-19, we make a call to the international community to accelerate the process of recovery and reconstruction."

The U.S. State Department said in a statement Friday that four U.S. helicopters from the Soto Cano Air Base near Tegucigalpa had flown to San Pedro Sula to participate in rescue operations.

Observers are already anticipating that the havoc wrought by Eta will pressure more people to migrate from countries that are already some of the primary senders of migrants to the United States border in recent years.



A road is blocked by a landslide in Purulha, northern Guatemala Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)



People walk around a road blocked by a landslide in Purulha, northern Guatemala Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)



People clear branches where a landslide blocked a road in Purulha, northern Guatemala Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)



Residents waded through a flooded road in the aftermath of Hurricane Eta in Planeta, Honduras, Thursday, Nov. 5, 2020. The storm that hit Nicaragua as a Category 4 hurricane on Tuesday had become more of a vast tropical rainstorm, but it was advancing so slowly and dumping so much rain that much of Central America remained on high alert. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)



A road is blocked by a landslide in Purulha, northern Guatemala Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Santiago Billy)



A dog stands on a foggy highway in Cumbre de Santa Elena, in northern Guatemala, Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)



A National Police officer carries an elderly woman out of an area flooded by water brought by Hurricane Eta in Jerusalem, Honduras, Thursday, Nov. 5, 2020. The storm that hit Nicaragua as a Category 4 hurricane on Tuesday had become more of a vast tropical rainstorm, but it was advancing so slowly and dumping so much rain that much of Central America remained on high alert. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)



Police help residents move to higher ground after they were rescued from a flooded area, in Planeta, Honduras, Friday, Nov. 6, 2020. As the remnants of Hurricane Eta moved back over Caribbean waters, governments in Central America worked to tally the displaced and dead, and recover bodies from landslides and flooding that claimed dozens of lives from Guatemala to Panama. (AP Photo/Delmer Martinez)



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"Now with this situation, this is going to be an exodus, a massive exodus of migrants toward the north," said Matheu.

The forecast had Eta strengthening to a tropical storm late Friday before nearing the Cayman Islands Saturday and crossing Cuba Sunday. From there it could reach Florida or eventually head toward the U.S. Gulf

coast, though the long-term path remained uncertain.

"Whatever comes out (of Central America) is going to linger a while," said Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach. "I'm not convinced we're done with Eta."

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