

Miskito Indians vent anger over Felix

The Miami Herald
Sep. 08, 2007

PUERTO CABEZAS, Nicaragua --

Hundreds gathered Friday on a beach in a remote jungle region of Nicaragua to mourn the victims of Hurricane Felix and condemn the government for doing too little to search for anyone who might have survived.

Tensions are rising between residents of the autonomous region hit by the storm and the central government as villagers complain they weren't given enough advance warning about the monster storm and are getting little aid in its aftermath.

A government official refused to give scarce gasoline Friday to 48-year-old Zacarias Loren, whose 19-year-old son was with a group of 18 people diving for lobster off a distant cay when the storm hit.

"These lives are important, too," Loren said. "They might be floating alive, but they are out there alone."

One woman, a 19-year-old whose mother had been working on a cay selling food and supplies to lobster fishermen, cried out under the gray sky: "Why did you have to go? Why didn't you take me with you?"

Disgruntled villagers came together on beach the region's main town, Puerto Cabezas, which has become the hub of relief efforts and official search missions for any survivors. Others set out on their own to try to find missing loved ones.

The eye of the hurricane passed directly over the Honduran-Nicaraguan coast, devastating seaside villages and island fishing hubs that were home to the Miskito Indians, descendants of Indians, European settlers and African slaves. The region has a long-standing mistrust of the central government, and is reachable only by plane or canoe in good weather.

Survivors from fishing communities off the coast said Nicaraguan authorities sailed by and sent out evacuation warnings only hours before the eye hit. Many lobster divers were already out at sea by then, and the waves and wind were too strong for their primitive sailboats. Hundreds of others were trapped on tiny distant cayes swallowed whole by the violent storm surge.

The death toll has ranged from 49 to more than 100, but no one has been able to tally the missing. It is likely no one will ever know how many lives were lost in the Category-5 storm.

Felix devastated the Miskito Indians' barrier islands - leaving only a few tree trunks where primitive dwellings once stood and filling the sea with debris. It also ruined the bumpy red-

dirt tracks that connected the region's larger communities, complicating efforts to deliver supplies in the disaster area.

The storm hit during the last two weeks of lobster season, the main source of income for most residents. Hundreds of fishermen and lobster divers, many of whom swim deep to the ocean floor simply by holding their breath, were caught at sea in open boats. Many women who work small businesses on the reefs selling food and supplies to the lobstermen were marooned.

Among them was Aurora Prada, a 39-year-old single mother of five, who said the sea was already wild by the time they received word of the fast-approaching hurricane. She piled into a boat with several others and rode out the storm in a swampy, protected area of the cayes. They spent hours bailing out seawater as bodies floated by, and were eventually rescued by a passing boat.

"The government is partly to blame because they warned us really late," she said.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, many have searched the sea themselves and buried bodies without notifying authorities. Even some bodies brought back to the rescue effort's hub in Puerto Cabezas have been put in graves without being identified, making future efforts at separating the missing from the dead nearly impossible.

Miscommunication and mistrust have not helped.

On Friday, authorities said some reports from remote areas turned out to be more rumor than fact. Honduran officials initially reported 150 Nicaraguans had been rescued from the sea. They later adjusted the figure to 52, and emergency chief Marcos Burgos said Friday that he was sure of only 28. He also said a Honduran Indian leader's report of 25 bodies washing ashore could not be confirmed.

"We know that three or four cadavers were found by Honduran fishermen who notified families of the victims in Nicaragua, and they were supposedly taken to be buried in their hometown, but we can't confirm that," he said. "These indigenous people have no borders. For them, Honduras is the same as Nicaragua.

"Afterward, they realized they made a mistake taking the bodies across a border without permission, and now they won't talk. They won't say anything to police."

On Thursday, about 500 people crowded a pier in Puerto Cabezas overlooking a beach where 13 bloated bodies had been laid out on black tarps after being pulled from the sea, their arms reaching for the sky. Some relatives of the missing tried to rush down a small wooden stairway to reach the bodies but were held back by police.

Food, medical help, mattresses and other aid continued to arrive from the U.S., Venezuela and Cuban governments, as well as nonprofits throughout the Americas. But hurricane survivors in villages reachable only by helicopter still lacked food, water and fuel. These

communities are used to fending for themselves, but Felix wiped out their crops, wrecked their boats and contaminated drinking water with debris and dead animals.