

After flood, long-term test for Mexico

As thousands remain homeless in Tabasco and business and agriculture suffer, many are pressing government to address extended support and future prevention efforts.

The Christian Science Monitor
November 16, 2007

Mexico City - The floodwaters that have devastated Tabasco – at one point covering some 80 percent of the Mexican state – are finally receding.

But the challenges ahead are vast. Tens of thousands of residents remain homeless, businesses have been ruined, and almost all the state's crops, including bananas, beans, and corn, have been destroyed.

Mexican President Felipe Calderón has received praise in many corners for his quick response to what he declared one of the nation's worst natural disasters. He has visited the state a half-dozen times in the past two weeks and quickly sent in thousands of troops to help rescue the stranded and restore order. He has called for more efficient distribution of supplies and called on Mexicans not to forget the needs of an estimated 1 million people affected.

But as the rescue shifts to recovery, many are asking tough questions about who is responsible for flooding that, in part, is blamed on inadequate control measures. Some say they fear the administration will not plumb the root causes of what they see as not just a natural disaster but a policy failure.

"The most difficult time is now," says Francisco Sanchez Ramos, an opposition federal legislator who represents Tabasco. "[We] want admissions from the [state and federal governments] for the responsibilities they bear."

Floods and landslides in southern Mexico, including Tabasco and Chiapas, have killed nearly two dozen people, say officials.

Two weeks after record-breaking rainfall produced Tabasco's worst flooding in over 50 years, efforts have shifted to vaccinating residents, pumping water out, and planning fumigation efforts.

Mexicans and residents across the globe have donated tons of supplies: President Calderón said 6,000 tons of food, blankets, clothes, and basic provisions have been collected.

"There's been a massive amount of resources coming into Tabasco, from the federal government and state governments. Health brigades have come from northern states to pass out medicines and vaccinate," says Erica Dahl-Bredine, country manager for Catholic Relief Services's Mexico Program.

The US ambassador to Mexico, Tony Garza, praised Mexicans for their solidarity. "The strength of the Mexican people in the face of a disaster of this magnitude is a tribute to the human spirit," Mr. Garza said in a statement.

Still, Calderón said that the distribution of supplies, which some residents and opposition politicians say has not reached some very remote communities, needed to be improved, and urged politicians not to fall into partisanship.

In many ways, his actions signal of a more open democracy, after former President Vicente Fox's victory in 2000 ended 71 years of one-party rule. Many say that has translated into a more open culture of emergency response.

George Grayson, a professor at the College of William & Mary in Virginia, compares Calderón's take-charge aura to the infamous inaction of the federal government after the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City. Then-President Miguel De La Madrid's downplaying of damage is remembered as a low point and a negative example for future governments, says Mr. Grayson. "Calderón's instincts were to go there and mobilize the government's resources," he says.

But some say that response is one thing, while long-term recovery and prevention is another. Mr. Sanchez Ramos, for example, says that Tabasco, a flat state prone to flooding, received money after a deluge in 1999 to create flood-control systems – money that today, officials say, is not entirely accounted for. He says that shows corruption in past state governments, and that the current governor, Andres Granier, must take responsibility, too.

Dan Lund, head of consulting firm Mund Americas in Mexico City, criticizes Calderón, who blamed the three days of rains that caused the floods on an "enormous climate change," for reaching for singular causes. "They need to ... figure out what went wrong and what can be done," he says. "There is no sign this is coming out of the administration."

For now, most continue to focus on rebuilding agriculture and the thousands of homes and businesses damaged or destroyed. The Mexican Association of Insurance Institutions estimated the damage to be \$700 million in Tabasco alone, but many expect a much higher number as few residents are insured. The area that was affected is among the poorest in the country, and Grayson says he expects a massive migration to Mexico City and along the US border.

Calderón urges ongoing action. "As time passes, interest and worry usually diminish," he said on a recent visit. "Help must continue not only for the coming days, but for the coming weeks and months."