

Hurricanes in Cuba caused losses in the billions

Cuba was hit in the past few weeks by two major hurricanes that have caused widespread destruction. Storm damages to housing, crops, electrical lines, schools and hospitals in Cuba will cost about \$5 billion, the Cuban government announced.

Cuba was already facing a housing crisis, low agricultural production and shortages of key materials. According to the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies University of Miami (Institute) the hurricanes caused following damages:

- Over 320,000 houses were damaged by the hurricanes.¹
- 50% of houses in Holguín have been irreparably damaged², 80% of houses in Banes have been destroyed³. In Nuevitas, Camaguey, at least 15% of the hotels were damaged⁴.
- 70% of the agricultural production in Villa Clara was destroyed⁵.
- Over 2 million Cubans have been displaced by the storms⁶.
- The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported estimates of damage between \$3-\$4 billion USD⁷.
- Cuba's health care infrastructure is severely damaged: in Isla de la Juventud, the general hospital, "Héroes de Baire," which serves 87,000 people, is not functional. "Comandante Pinares," a hospital in the municipality of San Cristobal, serving 200,000 people, has been severely damaged⁸.
- In Isla de la Juventud, "4,500 posts are reported down, 530 transformers damaged, 5,000 street lights destroyed and 38,700 electrical isolators and 800 tons worth of conductors are beyond repair."⁹ In Pinar del Rio, 55 km of the primary and secondary electrical network were severely damaged¹⁰.
- In Pinar del Rio, over 25,900 metric tons of agricultural crops were lost, and another 1,184 damaged. 13,070 hectares of root vegetables, 2,931 hectares of grains, and 543 hectares of fruits and 3,306 tobacco houses have been destroyed¹¹.

The next few weeks are critical for the Cuban government as to how it is going to react to meet the basic food, shelter and health needs of the Cuban people. It is also the first real test of General Raul Castro's administration in a crisis situation. Raul has failed to appear in public, delegating the role of spokespersons to first Vice President Ramon Machado Ventura and second Vice President Carlos Lage. If the Raul Castro regime is unable to address the basic needs within a short time, levels of frustration and despair will continue to grow, stated the report of the Institute.

As the report continues, the intermediate term outlook for economic recovery is dismal. The hyper-bureaucratic and highly centralized nature of Cuba's decision making process,

¹ Hernandez, Marta. "Más de 320,000 casas dañadas," Granma, September 11, 2008

² "Holguín: Más del 50% de las viviendas ha sufrido graves daños," Cuba Encuentro, September 10, 2008

³ "Prepararnos para la Recuperación," Granma, September 9, 2008

⁴ Robles, Frances. "Rising waters threaten Hurricane Ike-ravaged Cuba," Miami Herald, September 10, 2008

⁵ Robles, Frances. "Rising waters threaten Hurricane Ike-ravaged Cuba," Miami Herald, September 10, 2008

⁶ Williams, Carol J. "Ike Moves into Gulf to Regain Strength," Los Angeles Times, September 10, 2008

⁷ "Los Daños de Ike y Gustav podrían sumar 4.000 millones de dólares," Cuba Encuentro, September 10, 2008

⁸ PAHO (Pan American Health Organization). "2008 Hurricane Season, Cuba Situation Report.", <http://www.paho.org/english/dd/ped/hurricanes2008.htm> September 10, 2008

⁹ "Cuba: Hurricane Season 2008 Emergency Appeal No. MDRCU001" ReliefWeb

¹⁰ "Cuba: Hurricane Season 2008 Emergency Appeal No. MDRCU001" ReliefWeb

¹¹ "La agricultura, víctima de Gustav en Pinar del Río," Granma, September 2, 2008

together with the lack of resources, present formidable barriers to effective recovery efforts.

Source: Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies University of Miami

Cuba takes step to normalize ties with EU

Cuba has conditionally accepted an European union's offer from June to breathe life into mutual political ties, informed EU Observer on September 17, 2008.

In a letter cited by Reuters news agency, the Cuban foreign minister accepted the union's proposal to resume formal political dialogue "once the foundations and bases are established by joint agreement".

EU member states may renew high-level contacts with the Cuban regime.

The move is a direct response to the EU foreign ministers' decision in June to lift diplomatic sanctions on Havana, which were adopted in 2003.

The Cuban foreign minister's letter comes as the country recovers from damage caused by two massive hurricanes, Gustav and Ike. The hurricanes - the most destructive in the history of Cuba - passed through virtually the entire country at the beginning of September.

Source: EU Observer