



CUBA AFTER HURRICANES GUSTAV AND IKE:

A government failing to provide disaster relief while refusing international assistance

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This report was written by travelers who recently went to Cuba primarily to work with independent journalists and to provide aid for the families of political prisoners. This report may not be the result of a fact-finding humanitarian mission, but the authors were able to visit the majority of the areas affected by hurricanes on the island and talked to a large number of people in each of these provinces. This report's findings are based on their observations, the discussions they had with the people they met, and interpretations of what they saw and heard.

Basic information

In late August and early September, Hurricanes Gustav and Ike swept over Cuba causing an estimated total of US\$5 billion in damages, 7 deaths and over 440 000 damaged houses out of which over 63 000 were totally destroyed¹. The provinces of Pinar del Río and Isla de la Juventud were the most affected by Gustav, while the provinces of Holguín, Las Tunas and Camaguey were the most affected by Ike.

According to the Cuban government, Cuba has received 230 offers of aid from 63 countries by the end of September. However, many of these offers were either not accepted or are still under consideration.

From the European countries, Cuba only accepted aid offers from Spain and Belgium, but has recently accepted the EU Commission's offer of US\$2.6 million in immediate hurricane recovery aid and up to US\$38.8 million more in financing next year. However, the Czech Republic's offer of 100 000 EUR was refused outright and other offers, such as those of the Slovak Republic, Germany, Poland, Netherlands and Sweden, have not been told definitively whether or not they will be accepted. Some of these countries offers were up to of US\$ 500 000. Other EU countries, like Finland, United Kingdom, and Portugal have chosen to donate money through organizations like the Red Cross or Caritas.

¹ Reliefweb.int



The case of the United States is somewhat exceptional. The US has already formulated 4 different offers for hurricane relief and assistance, of which the last one amounted to US\$6.3 million. However, the Cuban government refused all of them and asked instead for the United States to lift the 46 years old embargo.

GUSTAV AND IKE

“Donde había Ike, ahora no hay nada”

We arrived in Cuba in the middle of September, about a week after the second Hurricane Ike passed through the island and over two weeks since the hurricane Gustav. We travelled across almost the entire island with the exception of the provinces Santiago de Cuba, Granma and the Isla de la Juventud.

The damage was obvious, but differed very much from province to province. The most affected provinces that we visited were Holguín, Camaguey and Pinar del Río.

However, by the end of September when we reached Pinar del Río, the worst of the damage had been cleaned up as this province was most affected by the first hurricane Gustav, passing already at the end of August. In the eastern provinces the situation was very different.

In Cuba, the hurricanes resulted in only 7 deaths, which indicates that the initial phase of preparatory activities for the hurricanes was well organized and successful. More than 2,500,000 people were forced to evacuate from what would be the most affected areas. If somebody didn't want to abandon their home, then the police came to take them away. This measure surely saved many lives, especially in villages, since housing is often inadequate. For example, in Holguín province it has been said that more than 80% of the houses suffered severe damage or were completely destroyed.

Suddenly, the post-hurricane operations were not as effective as the preparatory steps. Cuba's approach to dealing with the hurricanes has most often been compared with the situation in Haiti. While preparations for the hurricanes were clearly managed much better in Cuba than Haiti, which can be seen in the vast differences in the number of killed or injured, the situation after the catastrophe has been in many aspects the same. We were told by one diplomat that the food situation in Cuba is comparable to the one in Haiti and this was still in the time when the worst shortages had not come. Today the situation is much worse.



Due to the lack of almost everything in Cuba, the recovery is progressing very slowly and people are mostly left to solve their situation by themselves.

The reconstruction works have been focused on tourist infrastructure, electricity supplies and propaganda billboards. For example, many parts of Holguín province were still without electricity and there were no construction materials for the people to repair their houses by September 20th, but the luxury hotels were being re-opened at Guardalavaca beach in order to restore the tourist industry as soon as possible.

We saw another example of this on the way to Pinar del Río. We passed crowds of people waiting on the highway for some means of transport, houses without roofs and “naked” hills with nothing but broken trees. But at the same time we saw that new billboards had already been put up with portraits of Fidel and Raúl Castro and “Venceremos” and other messages suggesting that the brave people of Pinar del Río province will overcome this difficult situation.

Rubbish

In the provinces of Holguín, Camaguey and Santa Clara, heaps of rubbish were still visible in most cities with the exception of the main streets. The debris is being cleaned away very slowly due to the very limited amount of lorries and fuel available for this work. Surprisingly, we didn't see any military vehicles or machinery helping with these tasks. The few lorries we saw helping to clean the streets were civilians ones.



The housing situation and construction materials

The most common damage to houses in the areas affected by the hurricane was to roofs. Suddenly, there are not enough construction materials to repair the number of damaged houses and what little construction materials are available is not being given to the people as humanitarian aid but being sold. People caught selling construction materials privately are being severely punished, which means that people are totally dependent on the state almost non-existent supplies.

In addition, people critical of the regime's response to events told us that the material being sold for roofs contains asbestos, but this is unverified information.

Further complicating matters, it has often been raining heavily in the weeks following the hurricanes. So, people living in houses that have literally lost its roofs, are now losing other

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possessions, including their appliances and particularly bed mattresses, which are expensive and difficult to buy.

Most people with severely damaged or destroyed houses are living at their relatives or neighbours and are desperate as they do not expect much help from the state and have no idea how they will rebuild their houses. The hurricanes have severely aggravated the already critical housing situation in Cuba.





Electricity

Apart from infrastructure tied to tourism, most reconstruction activity seemed to focus on replacing or fixing electric posts. Electric lines were severely damaged throughout the island and at the time of our visit there were still vast areas without any electricity. This is especially true for rural areas and smaller towns. In some places, children have not been to schools for almost a month, because the schools either lack electricity or were damaged by the hurricanes.



Food

As we mentioned before, one diplomat told us that the food situation was “just as bad as in Haiti.” At the time of our visit, the prices of vegetables were three times higher than before the hurricanes. Prices continued to rise as the food reserves were getting smaller. The growing food shortage forced the government to take action by freezing food prices at pre-hurricane level at all agricultural markets. In response to this measure, almost all fruits and vegetables disappeared completely and the markets are now empty.



According to recent news from Cuba, the government has raised the amounts of food sold at state subsidized prices as rations, which means primarily rice, beans and cooking oil.

People's expectations are very grim. There are many who are expecting severe shortages and hunger and who compare the situation to the "special period" in the 90s. According to an emotional expression of one woman, after the hurricanes Gustav and Ike will come "the hurricane of hunger".

Transport

Food shortages and slow pace of reconstruction was further complicated by the Cuban government's hardly understandable move, which significantly raised the price of fuel just after the hurricanes hit the island. As a result, transportation has become even more scarce and expensive. Recently there has been news about the growing scarcity of fuel and the increased price of fuel was reflected in the prices of other goods.

International help and donations

Cuba has accepted only some of the foreign aid being offered and among the people there is a lot of discontent with two issues:

- 1) That the Cuban government has not accepted help from the United States and many European countries. The only offers from European states that were accepted were from Spain and Belgium. This clearly results from the "friendly approach" of Spanish government towards Cuban regime and the activities of the European commissioner, former Belgium foreign affairs minister Louis Michel. Understandably the people are angry that they are not getting all the help possible because of political games and resentments of their government.²
- 2) That donations sent to Cuba are not given to the people as humanitarian aid, but sold in state shops. Furthermore, the goods are being sold in Cuban convertible pesos (the "hard currency") and not the national currency, in which people's wages are paid.

² Assistance from the EU wasn't officially accepted until after we had returned from Cuba



General changes

We have a feeling, which was also expressed by many people we talked, that there are changes in the “social climate” on the island. Most people connected these changes to the fact that it is becoming increasingly obvious that the regime is incapable of managing the crisis caused by the hurricanes. The government can’t provide people with the necessary food, materials, medicines etc., but at the same time it is making it impossible for the people to obtain these goods elsewhere. To quote one Cuban: “The state doesn’t produce and doesn’t let us produce.” Naturally this has increased frustration among the Cubans.

There is a feeling that people are less afraid to complain and criticize. First, they feel that following the natural catastrophe they have a “moral right” to complain about the bad management of the reconstruction activities. Second, there has been a growing feeling of division within the government itself. There are two examples showing these tendencies.

“Mini-revolution in Viñales”

During our stay on the island I was told a story about how the leader of the Communist Party in Viñales was forced to resign after he told a TV station that Viñales had not been damaged by the hurricanes even though it belonged to one of the most affected areas. An angry member of the party called to the central committee in Havana to denounce this as a lie and, as a consequence, a high Party official came to make a personal inspection. When the Viñales leader attempted to criticize the “informant” at a big meeting, the woman who made the call to Havana stood up, defended herself and accused the leader of being incapable, useless and corrupt. The rest of the people at the meeting supported her and the Party leader was forced to resign.

At the moment of our visit there were activities organized by the party in Viñales aimed at calming the people down, praising them for the good work they had been doing after the hurricanes, etc.

This has become the government’s general “public relations policy.” Since the government knows that it can’t satisfy the people’s needs, it is trying to calm the people and raise their

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spirits and optimism. In the official state news there are no tragic reports from the damaged areas, instead there are optimistic, several minutes long reports about factories that “enthusiastically continue to bake bread and to feed the people”.

“Contradictions in Granma”

Recently there have been numerous incidents that more or less openly point to the divisions within the government itself. There have been several instances where the official newspaper, Granma, published one of the “Reflections of Fidel Castro” one day and then published an article the next day that contradicted the most “hard-line” and extreme opinions expressed by the former president.

Things of this nature were unimaginable before and clearly reflect a certain change in the way the government wants to address Cubans. However, it might also mean that the government is simply aware that, because of the disastrous situation after the hurricanes, it has to treat the people in a way that will calm their frustrations and eliminate the threat of open and massive protests.