

Dispatch #10A – June 17, 2010

Quixaya, in Guatemala's western *altiplano* in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Agatha

Written by JP Laplante, MA NRES (Geography) Candidate

Dear family, friends, colleagues,

The following two emails are letters written about a week ago and based on time spent in Quixaya, in Guatemala's western *altiplano*, helping with the tropical storm relief efforts of the *Comité Campesino del Altiplano* (CCDA....or Campesino Committee of the Highlands). Unfortunately, for those in North America, it appears that the sinkhole in Guatemala City and the Pacaya eruption have dominated the news. However, a hidden human disaster has descended upon many parts of Guatemala..... *por ustedes que no hablan español...lo siento!*



Figure 1. JP Laplante (Left) with Rodolfo (2nd from Left) of the CCDA compiling the Patulul Shelters Supervisor's Priorities

Sunday June 7, 2010

The past three days have been a lesson in the destructive power of water. Tropical Storm Agatha has left in its wake a country in shock, a people realizing that it has been dealt a natural blow not felt since the 1976 earthquake that killed roughly 25,000 people. Talking to people near Quixaya, a town in the western highlands south of beautiful Lake Atitlan, it is clear that Agatha is worse

than Hurricanes Stan (2005) and Mitch (1998) combined.

The numbers speak to the suffering going on....

275 dead and disappeared, more than 200,000 people affected (many losing their homes, their crops, and everything they owned...besides loved ones).

I also have no doubt that the official statistics are wholly underestimated, as Leocadio asked the other day...“what about all those who lost everything but are living with families and friends and are not in the official shelters...have they even been accounted for!?” The answer is likely no. The numbers also likely do not count the communities whose houses are standing but have lost access to their drinking water. In many cases the roads that would allow the trucking in of water are also closed.



Figure 2. CCDA members delivering Medical Supplies to a San Lucas Shelter

Yesterday I visited emergency shelters in both San Lucas Toliman and Patulul, where it was clear that a human disaster had descended upon tens of thousands of people, and little or no official government “help” had arrived.

My stay in Quixaya was sparked upon learning of the terrible impacts to this region, and based on a longstanding connection to the CCDA through my supervisor Dr. Catherine Nolin. The CCDA is a campesino organization working for land reform in Guatemala and supporting hundreds of small family farms that it has purchased (for the families).



Figure 3. Marcelo and a CCDA Compañera Delivering Supplies in a San Lucas Shelter

Some of you know the fruit of the CCDA's labour if you have previously supported us through the Guatemalan coffee we sell. In the face of having lost 150,000 coffee plants that were finally (after 4 years) ready for harvest, and their community's entire watercress harvest, the CCDA have taken on themselves to directly intervene and support the relief efforts in their district, and to fundraise in order to make this happen. Attached, you can find the CCDA's urgent donation request which clarifies their objectives and the types of support they are looking for.



Figure 4. CCDA Compañero and Teodoro delivering water to Patulul Shelter

And now I find myself helping in some small way. Upon my arrival on Friday, Teodoro and Rodolfo (two CCDA staff) and I sorted through generously donated medical and basic relief supplies that had been delivered from Canada. Suitcases later, we had divided things up into 'relief bags' - a little bit for each of the shelters we would be visiting the next day. However, after learning just how many shelters were operating in the two towns we were to visit - San Lucas Toliman and Patulul - it is clear that this is a drop in the bucket for what is needed on the ground.

Sunday marked our visits to San Lucas and Patulul. The road to San Lucas was shocking (see photos 5, 6, and 7).



Figure 5. Rodolfo Carrying Medical Supplies Past a boulder the size of a house

The rivers had become small oceans of furious water, ripping apart the mountainsides, washing away bridges and roads, carrying boulders the size of small bungalows for miles, and carving new crevasses into the soft volcanic soil as it crushed all that was in its path. Only the providence to be far from the tumbling mountains and rising rivers meant survival. The record amount of water that fell on Guatemala one week ago did not just fill the sewers - it ripped apart a country.



Figure 6. Small-Rivers Became Oceans



Figure 7. Digging out in a rural community south of San Lucas Toliman

The biggest long-term impact, aside from the many families who lost loved ones, is the massive loss of homes, crops and water systems. Both water, and earth moved by water, acted to destroy the lives of people here. In Quixaya, the river rose like it has never before, carrying away this year's watercress harvest, burying the riverside farm plots with giant boulders (see photo 5) and in many cases, carrying away the productive soil that would bring about many more harvests. Closer to San Lucas Toliman, entire villages were flooded by rocks and mud (see photos 6 and 7 above). In some places the mud was more than two meters deep. I stood fixed at the eerie sight of standing ABOVE a roof and knowing that mud had completely filled the home. I imagine that when the home is finally excavated, the empty shell of walls (if there are any) will simply collapse.



Figure 5. Rodolfo inspecting the Quixaya watercress harvest that has been lost

In San Lucas, an entire mountain side gave way in many places, tumbling hundreds of meters, gathering momentum and crashing into and over the farms and homes that lie on the edge of town. Due to the ongoing danger that more landslides will occur on this now destroyed slope, many have effectively lost the land they live on. For the already marginal in society (these people lived on the edge of town for a reason), this is devastating. These families do not have a savings account or bank credit in order to buy new land. It is being openly debated in San Lucas just how to relocate the thousands of people left homeless and landless.

The number of lives lost does not reflect the suffering here. Since many were wise enough to flee their homes to higher ground, the number of people affected but spared their lives is high. Upon inspection of the destruction, I am surprised that only 270 lives have been lost (or 'disappeared').

Our visits to the shelters were at once inspiring and heartbreaking. The local CCDA members and community leaders had acted quickly to open shelters for the many now homeless. People were quietly passing time, the kids less quietly and in typical kid fashion were having fun. But a veil of quiet desperation hung over all. Did they have food and water? Well yes, but not much. Maybe two days worth. How will you get more? We have no idea...the water you arrived with is all we have, and had you not arrived we would not have any. Where will these people go? Who knows, they have nowhere to go.



Figure 6. When a bucket of water means the world

The problem of land is exactly the 'big' issue that is at the heart of the CCDA's work. They are now incorporating the needs of those now destitute into their ongoing effort to secure land for landless campesinos and to advocate for broad land reform in Guatemala. It is the eternal irony here that folks have nowhere to go when millions of acres of productive land is in the hands of a few families not growing anything on it. Roughly 70% to 80% of Guatemala's land is owned by 2% of the population.

I quickly realized my ignorance of what disaster means from my previous experiences behind my television in Canada. **Disaster is not what happens when you lose your home. It happens when the shelter runs out of water and food. It happens when your kid gets bronchial pneumonia in a shelter with hundreds of other families, and have no access to medicine, or a doctor.** The despair sinks in when the shelter simply closes and an entire community are now homeless and without a roof over their heads (this has yet to happen here...but many of the shelters were in schools that are slated to return to normal and eventually evict their temporary tenants).



Figure 7. Rodolfo and Teodoro Explaining Medical Supplies to Patulul Shelter

In one small primary school in Patulul, 500 people were crammed into maybe 10 small classrooms. This was 1 of 8 in the city. In a market space off of the bus terminal, one man thought we were doctors because we were delivering some basic medicines. He rushed up excited because his baby had trouble breathing, and he was sick as well. His quiet despair returned when we explained that no, we weren't doctors, and that the two small bags of supplies were all we could offer. The one puffer in the bag was maybe appropriate, but who knows. All we could tell him was that he needed to see a doctor...

However small our contributions were in the grand scheme of things, they were met with deep gratitude. Contrary to this country's media spin doctors, none of the shelters' had received government supplies or medicines. Further news was even more distressing - President Colom had told the international community that Guatemala doesn't need help. This is so far from the truth it's disgusting. Not only do these shelters scrape by day-to-day, but their is no end in sight for those without homes.

Guatemala needs your help

The help needed here is two-fold. First, supplies and volunteers are needed to continue supporting the emergency shelters and to begin rebuilding the communities that have been wiped out (carpenters, electricians, plumbers....interested in a trip?!). Depressingly, I can't even imagine how the rebuilding will happen in a society as fundamentally unjust as this one. However, in the meantime, these people need access to clean water, food, preventative support (against T.B., cholera, etc.), medicines, beds, and the things we take for granted...shoes, toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, clothes, toys, schoolbooks...the list goes on.



Figure 8. Two Patulul girls standing in front of everything their family has saved

Second, there is a phantom disaster that I fear is as bad and if ignored, more fatal than the storm. This is the loss of the country's crops that are the life-support for the most vulnerable sector of Guatemalan society. The families supported by the CCDA lost 150,000 coffee plants that were bearing fruit after 4 years of waiting. And this is but a drop in the bucket. In many cases, entire family and community plots were lost in the torrential rains and landslides. Only a stones throw from me, Quixaya's (home of the CCDA) entire watercress harvest is simply no more. These people will not only be hungry in 4 months when their harvest was expected, but are already hungry because work on destroyed fincas has been drastically cut. Alberta, the most wonderful elder and along with Lesbia, my host family in Quixaya, tells me of family and friends who are selling their kitchen dishes in order to eat. \$0.50 for a glass. Others are so hungry that they are selling their clothes in order to buy food for their kids.



Figure 9. My three water carrying compañeros - Rambo Uno, Rambo Dos, Rambo Tres

I normally loathe to ask favours, but I can't sit here and not ask for your help. I'm asking you to support the work of the CCDA who are on the ground helping right now (see the attached word file, or visit <http://cafejusticia.ca/fundraiser-for-the-ccda>). Any size and kind of donation is welcome. They are currently raising funds through their partner organizations in Canada and I am hoping through this email to raise a few thousand dollars for them. If you can find it in your heart and savings account to send \$5, or \$500, I'd very much appreciate it. I have less information about exactly how other supplies can be delivered. However, queries can be made to Steve Stewart (<cjgreenbeans@gmail.com>) about that. Donations can be made to:

Cafe Justicia - BC, in collaboration with CoDevelopment Canada, will be collecting donations to send to the CCDA for their relief effort. **If you are able to contribute, please send cheques to Cafe Justicia BC at 3205 Findlay St., Vancouver BC, V5N 4E6** (CoDevelopment Canada is a registered charity, so if you need a tax receipt, please make the cheque out to CoDevelopment and put CCDA relief in the memo line). Other groups raising funds in Canada for the CCDA's relief work are Rights Action (rightsaction.org) and the Breaking the Silence Network (www.breaking-the-silence.org).

Safe and sound, but in the middle of it,

JP

For a day by day photo essay of the field school, see:

<http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=427370&id=532435594&l=c37feae6fd>

and

<http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=437732&id=532435594&l=4bcd6199e0>