

IMF Caused Killer Flood In Hispaniola

by Jorge Luis Meléndez Cárdenas

The devastating floods and mudslides that killed more than 2,000 men, women and children, and wiped out entire towns on both sides of the Haitian/Dominican Republic border on the island of Hispaniola in late May, might have been triggered by week-long torrential rains; but the tragedy was no “natural disaster.” It was the entirely predictable consequence of decades of looting on the part of the international banking elites, the deliberate stripping away of natural resources the net export of capital to pay the debt, and austerity policies cold-bloodedly imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

Beyond the deaths, thousands remain homeless, while entire crops of bananas, rice, and other foods were lost; many cows, sheep, and pigs drowned; and dramatic devastation was wrought to the ecology of the region.

As Many as 4,000 Deaths

Just one week after the May 16 presidential elections in the Dominican Republic (DR), heavy downpours began for three days across the island. Those rains eventually caused the flooding of the Soliette River, which begins in Haiti but which crosses into the neighboring DR, where it is called the Rio Blanco. The most devastating effect of the flood was concentrated on the area of Jimaní, a small border province in the DR, and in the neighboring zone on the Haitian side. The flooding caused the deaths of nearly 2,000 people in Haiti, and another 500 on the Dominican side, as far as the official reports go. Some estimates are that as many as 4,000 may have died.

Engineer José Miguel Méndez Cabral, consultant to the Dominican College of Engineers, Architects, and Land Surveyors (CODIA) and also an hydraulics specialist, told this correspondent that Hurricane Georges in 1998 clogged up the flow of the Rio Blanco, by dragging millions of tons of gravel into its depths, creating an artificial dike in the disaster area that was never dredged out, for lack of funds.

Between the evening of May 22 and 3:00 AM the next morning, 247.8 millimeters (nearly 10 inches) of rain fell on the area, causing a flood of over 200 million cubic meters of water to pour into a basin with a flow capacity of only 1,686 cubic meters per second, which only 24 hours earlier had been a dry river bed.



The deterioration of living conditions on both sides of the island, through the repeated hammer blows of IMF austerity policies, has made the task of maintaining the basic infrastructure of the two nations increasingly difficult.

Experts blame the flooding on deforestation, but the question to be asked is, *why* are these populations deforesting their own nations? The answer is that there is no electricity in many parts of the country, and neither gas nor other fuels are made available to the population, so they are forced to turn to the inefficient burning of wood and charcoal to heat water, cook food, and otherwise survive.

This is not just going on in the region affected by the recent floodings; the gravity of the situation can be seen in the Dominican capital of Santo Domingo itself, where, on orders of the IMF, the generation and distribution of electricity was privatized, both raising the cost of the service and making it less reliable. The companies—primarily of foreign origin—who obtained the concessions, have invested little or nothing in new generating capacity or in improving distribution systems.

While in the period immediately before the elections, the lights were nearly always on, after the elections, the Dominican Republic has returned to near daily black-outs, sometimes for 10 or more hours a day. This correspondent had to wait more than two days in order to complete and transmit this article, due to constant blackouts which made the use of a computer impossible.

The Haitian case is even more pathetic, especially since the deterioration of its environment dates much further back. The situation there considerably worsened with the three year-long embargo imposed against the country in 1991 by the first Bush Administration, after Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted the first time. Given the impossibility of importing fuel to cook food, the desperate Haitian population began to cut down trees, whenever and wherever they could. The United States and other member countries of the Organization of American States, which approved the genocidal embargo against Haiti, bear a large measure of responsibility for this latest tragedy of the flooding.