
Cuba leads world in managing disasters

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The utter failure of the imperialists and the region's capitalist governments to warn the people of the Indian Ocean about the tsunami and to mitigate the chaos that reigned both during and after the devastation brings into bold relief the monumental accomplishments of socialist Cuba in the sphere of disaster management.

The capitalist propaganda machine has focused on the suffering of the people victimized by this disaster and has opened up a false debate over whether the tsunami was an act of god or an act of nature. The message is that, either way, this is fate and nothing could really be done to change things. Missing from the debate is the crucial question of how the catastrophic effects of this disaster could have been avoided.

The record of the Cuban government in preparing its population for hurricanes and other natural disasters so as to minimize the loss of human life gives the lie to religious mysticism and fatalistic thinking. It also stands as a practical example of how to reduce the needless loss of life.

Cuba has been cited by the United Nations, the International Federation of the

Red Cross, the Red Crescent Society and other agencies and authorities who deal with the effects of natural disasters as the world model in disaster management, not only for underdeveloped countries but for all countries. Massive, humane evacuations of hundreds of thousands of people have been carried out within hours during hurricanes that reached high levels.

In 2001, when Hurricane Michelle, a level-4 storm, hit with sustained 125-mile-per-hour winds and widespread floods, more than 700,000 people were evacuated. Only five Cubans lost their lives in the storm, which killed 20 people in Central America.

More dead in California than Cuba

It is noteworthy that prolonged rains in California have already killed almost twice as many people in a two-week period as the 16 who died in six major hurricanes in Cuba between 1996 and 2002. The Cuban method of education, preparation, warning and organized mass intervention during natural disasters is sorely missed right now in California.

In California, many people were killed by a mud slide in La Conchita after two weeks of rain. The same spot had suffered a similar mud slide 10 years ago. If the Cuban method had been applied in California, there would have been no loss of life.

An analysis of the Cuban method by Oxfam, a prestigious bourgeois British humanitarian organization that works in a variety of areas, led to the publication of a 68-page study in 2004 entitled, "Weathering the Storm: Lessons in Risk Reduction from Cuba." (oxfamamerica.org) This study praised the effectiveness of the Cuban system of centralized, planned organization based on mass participation that has saved many lives during natural disasters.

"Cuba is unusual in that its socioeconomic development model and its disaster-response policies combine to substantially reduce its population's vulnerability to hazards. Over the past 40 years, Cuba's socialist government has emphasized social and economic development, prioritizing an equitable distribution of resources, universal access to social services, and a narrower urban-rural development gap," says the report.

"Cubans are highly educated, with a strongly developed sense of solidarity and social cohesion, extensive experience in mobilization and highly organized through mass organizations, professional groups and political structures."

Cuba has a comprehensive National Civil Defense system which, the report says, "is as much a concept of organization as it is a system of measures and procedures." Its work is based on a national plan, formulated both from above and

at the grass roots level, which relies on mass organizations such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), the Cuban Women's Federation, student groups, trade unions and the Association of Small Producers.

"In addition to specific assets for work on disasters," continues the report, "there is a political commitment at all levels of government to allocate all resources at hand for the preservation of life in emergencies. This allows the Cubans to make use of any and all available resources, such as using local schools as evacuation shelters, securing boats and buses for evacuation purposes, or tapping the ham radio association as a communications network." All other aspects of preparation are "secondary to the basic commitment of saving lives."

Detailed planning at all levels

The national plan for disaster preparedness is refined and worked on every year, from the highest levels to the neighborhoods and block associations. The report carried the results of numerous interviews which revealed the results of detailed planning, organization and education.

"Regardless of their role, everyone was clearly aware of what measures and what procedures they needed to follow in case of a hurricane. They knew the stages of emergency warning, where to get information, how to secure their house, and where they would go for shelter if they needed to evacuate. A belief that the government would prioritize people's safety prevailed. The Cuban population clearly has developed a 'culture of safety.'"

Jose Castro, secretary of the Commission of Evacuation and Students in the Civil Defense of Cienfuegos, told Oxfam that "Any child in school can give you an explanation: how you prepare, what you do. Students, they know what you do ... how to gather things in the house and put them away ... shut off the water and electricity. All students, workers, campesinos get this training."

Basic to preparedness is what is called "community risk mapping." In fact, according to Oxfam, "[i]t is the meticulous, ongoing risk mapping at the community level by community members that functions as the mortar in Cuba's wall of risk reduction."

A discussion with a representative of the Cuban Women's Federation in the district of Havana illustrated this point: "I am responsible for this part of the neighborhood. ... If a hurricane hits, I know that inside one multi-family unit is an old woman in a wheelchair, who is going to need help to leave. I have 11 single mothers on second and third floors of apartment buildings with children under two who will need more support to evacuate and special needs in the shelters. I have two pregnant women, one on that block and one on this one, who will need

special attention.”

Each year the plan is updated to include new information and an evaluation of past experience. “Beginning at the CDR level,” said Jose Castro, “authorities update the plan in their neighborhood. The CDR members write down the houses that may be vulnerable in their census, including the name of the family and number of children. They note who goes where during an evacuation, who will need extra help, etc.” The neighborhood plan then goes up to the municipal, provincial and national level to be integrated into the national plan.

All public officials responsible for safety

Unlike in the United States, all public officials are charged with dealing with emergencies. “By law,” says the report, “all heads of provincial and municipal governments are the provincial and municipal Civil Defense directors in charge of organizing, coordinating and monitoring all the work related to prevention, mitigation, emergency response and reconstruction in their area. ... This creates both a centralized decision-making process, which is key for emergency situations, alongside a decentralized implementation process, providing agility and adaptation equally necessary for effective emergency preparedness and response.

“In practice, the head of the Civil Defense in any given province or municipality is someone closely familiar with how government works in that province. It also means that the local groups are taking orders from someone familiar to them, not a stranger brought for the duration of the emergency. In the event of an emergency all heads of work places, hospitals, schools or businesses assume their responsibilities to direct their staff in carrying out civil defense measures.”

All the organizational structures are mobilized to alert the population as a hurricane approaches. Meetings are called, plans reviewed, command centers are organized. “At the community level, the CDRs, mass organizations, family doctors, school directors, and heads of institutions” review emergency plans and check evacuation procedures, destinations and supplies.

In the evacuation phase: “If a person’s house has a roof of tile, fiber-cement or thatch, they must move to a house of poured concrete. If those options have already been assigned in the neighborhood, the family is assigned to a group shelter and transport provided. Everything from cars to trucks to horse carts is mobilized for transport by the heads of the civil defense. ... In order to evacuate people in high-risk areas, all necessary means of transport, such as helicopters and boats, are put at the service of Civil Defense rescue teams for this purpose.

“In Cuba,” continues the report, “structures that run everyday life are the

structures also used for implementing civil defense measures.”

In other words, the revolutionary organization of the mass of workers and peasants in a socialist society puts the interests of the people first in all spheres of life; it naturally becomes the general framework within which it is possible to prepare effectively for natural disasters and minimize the loss of life.

World leader despite U.S. blockade

Cuba is a relatively poor country, underdeveloped by centuries of Spanish colonialism, 60 years of U.S. imperialist control and decades of a vicious economic blockade. Yet, it has surpassed the richest and most developed country in the world in the sphere of natural disaster management.

Had India, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and other countries in the Indian Ocean region had socialist regimes that put the interests of the people at the forefront, day-in, day-out, as in socialist Cuba, they would have seized upon the scientific and technological technology to detect tsunamis that is already deployed in the Pacific Ocean and collectively either purchased or developed it themselves.

The greatest loss of life during the tsunami was in Banda Aceh in northern Sumatra, nearest the site of the undersea earthquake that triggered the waves. Capitalist television networks have recently carried footage of amateur video showing the tsunami hitting Banda Aceh. But first you saw people cleaning up from the earthquake, slowly and methodically for 25 minutes, completely oblivious of what was to follow — despite definite danger signs, like the sea receding.

An organized, educated, prepared population with the government fully behind it could have evacuated thousands of people, even at the site closest to the epicenter of the tsunami. Evacuation to safety in most areas involved moving people only a relatively short distance from the coast. This holds in even greater measure for the high-casualty areas further from the quake, such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and of course East Africa.

Tsunamis are not at all unknown in the Indian Ocean region. There have been three in Indonesia alone in the last 12 years.

A socialist government such as exists in Cuba would have been alert to all the warnings coming from the scientific community about the vulnerability of the region to tsunamis. And of course the population would have been thoroughly trained and organized to deal with typhoons and other natural disasters, so it would have had the means in place to deal with a tsunami.

Cuba, poor as it is, has worked virtual miracles of public safety despite all the obstacles put in its way by the blockade and the undying hostility of U.S.

administrations for over four decades. Its struggle to overcome the effects of hurricanes and natural disasters by integrating its disaster mitigation work within the general framework of socialist planning and organization, despite its extreme material limitations, shows that in the natural world humanity can take increasing control over its destiny. But Cuba laid the groundwork by first expelling imperialism, overturning capitalism and taking control over the means of production and the resources of society so it could organize them to serve human need and not profit — that is, by carrying out the socialist revolution.
