

Brazilian Flood: 116 Dead and No Place to Rebuild

Contributed by Elma Lia Nascimento
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"This is the worst climatic tragedy of Santa Catarina's history," said governor Luiz Henrique da Silveira. Strong rains have been pushing his state in the south of Brazil for over two months now. In the last 10 days, however, the floods have become extremely destructive, destroying whole towns and leaving over 100 dead people. Brazil's National Security Force has been sent to the area.

According to numbers that keep going up by the hour, over 79,000 people are homeless, 114 have died from which at least eight were children aged less than 10, and 19 are listed as disappeared. More than 1.5 million have been affected by the rains.

Just this Sunday night it was confirmed the death of a child and woman due to a new landslide in Luiz Alves in the Itajaí Valley. Heavy rains are also hitting now Rio de Janeiro, where at least two people have already died and Espírito Santo and the number of those left homeless in the three states surpass 85,000.

Weather forecasts call for more rain, with short dry spells, until December 5. Twelve cities have been declared state of public calamity. They are: Benedito Novo, Blumenau, Brusque, Camboriú, Gaspar, Ihota, Itajaí, Itapoá, Luis Alves, Nova Trento, Rio dos Cedros and Rodeio.

The arrival of a cold front this week bringing more rain to the area should not only hinder help and rescue operations but also hurt the logistics to distribute food and medicine.

Recent weather studies in the region show that Santa Catarina has seen drastic changes, in recent years, in its standard climatic conditions. Since 2006 the state has experienced an increase in heavy rainfall as well as a longer drought season. Besides global warming, the area has to deal with two other factors: unplanned urban growth and uncontrolled deforestation.

Meteorologist Gislânia Cruz revealed that the amount of rain in the Blumenau area was over 900 millimeters (35 inches) in November. The average rainfall for this period is 110 millimeters (4.3 inches).

Some experts believe that the main reason for the large number of deaths is not the rain but the way risky areas were irregularly occupied. Landslides this time caused more damages than the ones brought by the 1984 floods.

Experts from the Geological Institute and the Institute of Technological Studies of São Paulo were in Blumenau, one of the cities hit the most by the rainfalls to analyze the terrain. They concluded that 60% of the inspected areas cannot have

houses rebuilt.

On Saturday, Brazilian Air Force planes carried to the town of Navegantes part of the structure to be used to build a campaign hospital in the Itajaí-Ilhota stretch of the interstate road that links the Brazilian south to São Paulo, the BR-101. The temporary construction is to assist the population most affected by the rains in the state.

The Air Force Campaign Hospital is supposed to start seeing patients this Monday, December 1st. The 40 health professionals, including doctors, nurses and aides, who will staff the place have already arrived on Saturday.

According to the Civil Defense, business hours will be from 8 am to 4 pm while the area needs extra medical care. Among the doctors there are a mouth surgeon and physicians specialized in orthopedics, gynecology, anesthetics and pediatrics.

Santa Catarina's Health Department is accepting donations of material to fight leptospirosis, a common infectious disease in flooded areas. Among the items needed are galosh-type boots, gloves, and hypochlorite for cleansing and disinfection. Gauze and bandaid are also accepted, as long as in sealed packages.

Volunteers with experience in health, including doctors, nurses and psychologists are also being recruited. They are invited to apply for the position at the site www.saude.sc.gov.br.

Donations for the flood victims have already surpassed 3.5 million Brazilian reais (US\$ 1.52 million), according to the Civil Defense. More than 800 tons of food and over 50 tons of clothes have also been received.

The situation in Itajaí is heart-wrenching. For more than a week shops have been closed and people didn't have a way to buy groceries or to withdraw money from the bank. Restaurants had no food and hotels were without water.

The bodies of the dead were so numerous that the Coroner's Office (IML, Medicolegal Institute) had no place for all of them. They were lacking even body bags used to wrap the deceased.

Firemen were so overwhelmed they were not finding time to rest. Some were sleeping not more than an hour and a half a day, stretching in any place they could find for a little nap. On Wednesday, the governor of Santa Catarina declared official mourning of three days.

Lino Bragança Peres, a professor at the Architecture and Urbanism Department of Santa Catarina's Federal University, believes that the deforestation of the Atlantic forest may have contributed to the disaster brought in by the rainfalls.

"The trees were substituted by houses and underbrush," he explains, "something that contributed to the erosion. These landslides would occur sooner or later, the strong rainfalls of the last two months only accelerated that process."

The Atlantic forest (Mata Atlântica) used to cover an area of about 1.29 million square kilometers (498 million square miles), in 17 Brazilian states, including Santa Catarina. The biome took up about 15% of the Brazilian territory. Nowadays, only 7% of this total remains intact.

The Atlantic forest deforestation is directly linked to the growth of Brazilian cities. The professor points out that the disorganized occupation by communities is another important factor for the tragedy.

"It rained well above the average, but this is only part of the problem. The model of irregular occupation adopted by the cities from Itajaí Valley contributed to that occurrence. And everything with the public authority's tacit consent," stated Peres.

According to the expert, the first houses in the region were built close to the rivers during the 19th century by Europeans who immigrated to Brazil. In the 20th century people started to also occupy hills and hillsides. Planning was something unknown. Says the professor, "Municipal planning started very late in Brazil, in the 1970s, when the cities had already grown."

The solution would be to relocate those living on hillsides to safer locations. "The trouble, however," he says, "is that good part of the areas suitable for living are already been used."