

Center for Democracy
— IN THE —
AMERICAS



**Research Report: Cuba after the hurricanes
The Center for Democracy in the Americas
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Introduction



A billboard in Havana: "Our Duty is to Overcome."

Cuba in the last weeks was hit hard by 4 hurricanes and tropical storms. Hurricanes Gustav and Ike did in excess of \$5 billion in damage to the island. Remarkably, only seven Cuban lives were lost. But millions of poor people who had nothing lost nearly everything – crops and food, homes and personal effects – and Cuba lost significant investments in utilities, infrastructure, and the means of production made over thirty years.

Here in the United States, policymakers and the public can rely only on media reports to understand the scope of damage on the island. Moreover, the attention of the press is focused on hurricane damage in the United States, and the financial storms that are devastating Wall Street. Consequently, there is a declining amount of information available about what has happened in Cuba, how Cubans are coping, what assistance is needed, and whether changes in US policy are appropriate in wake of the tragedy.

To address some of those questions, the Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA) sent a small research delegation to Cuba. Our delegation visited Havana city, Havana province, Pinar Del Rio (city), Viñales, Los Palacios, and San Cristobal during our brief stay in Cuba. We interviewed numerous Cubans in these communities, and visited the sites of great devastation in places located in Cuba's western provinces.

The delegation included Sarah Stephens, executive director; Curt Schaeffer, an expert in development and disaster recovery at Casals and Associates and a member of the CDA Board; and David Dreyer of TSD Communications. This report contains our **findings**, our **recommendations**, and notes from our **conversations with Cubans**.

It is always hard to generalize about Cuba, an island of 11 million people and 169 municipalities. To be sure, a report based on visits to 6 areas can carry only limited weight. But we hope that the information contained in this report, based on our observations and conversations with several dozen Cubans, connected members of the Party, a leader of Cuban civil society, and some foreign observers, contributes to a greater understanding of what happened with the storms and what implications they may have for US policy going forward.

Findings

1. Cubans we spoke to were generally satisfied with the government's response to the crisis.

Cubans told us the response to the hurricanes was rapid and comprehensive. The military and the communist party took especially active and visible roles. Officials were deployed in advance of the hurricane and their presence continues to be felt. One Cuban called the group sent into the field by the government "The A-Team."

We visited Los Palacios, a community in Cuba's west among those hardest hit by the storms. This community was thick with Cuban government assistance – we saw numerous vehicles driving the streets hauling away debris and MinBas¹ trucks fixing electrical and telephone service. We spoke to several families who had varying experiences with government help. One family lost a roof after Hurricane Gustav and got government materials supplied to replace the roof before Ike hit. They lost another roof with Ike and that one has been fixed as well. Neighbors elsewhere in Los Palacios were still waiting for assistance.



Relief and repair crews were active in Los Palacios.

Electricity in many places throughout the island was restored in days after the storms. People in Pinar Del Rio told us that they were in the dark for five days. Many communities are still experiencing rationed access to electricity.

Havana was largely spared damage from the storms, but several Cubans told us that the residents of the city will feel the impact as the government directs resources from the capital to harder hit areas.

Morale was better than we expected. We were not met in these communities by dazed survivors. Few Cubans offered direct complaints or asked us for money. People seemed determined; in most places, there was normalcy. The open question is how they will feel six months from now.

¹ Ministry for Basic Industries

30% or more of movie theaters in Cuba were destroyed by the storms. Two movie theaters on the Isla de Juventud were totally wiped out. The other 2/3 are affected. This is important because the citizenry feels solidarity during the day but they are sad during the nighttime. Movies offer a respite from that. To fill the vacuum, there are artists who are touring, helping with recovery during the day and entertaining at night. The population feels it is receiving active support. Spirits are high. **Comments of one Cuban to the delegation**

2. Food and housing are their biggest concerns

We spoke to Cubans in each community about their access to food. We visited a farmer's market in Havana, and talked to Cubans at food stands and stores everywhere we went. We also walked into the countryside and talked with a campesino family in their home about their losses from the storms.

While Cubans seem to have access to food now, they are worried about what is to come in the next month, three months, and beyond. Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and other Cuban officials are openly talking about hardship for the next six months to prepare the population for possible shortages. If there is a silver lining in the hurricanes' destruction it was their timing; the storms hit roughly between harvest and planting. A lot of stored food was destroyed, but September, October, and November are the beginning of the next cycle for planting, and these crops normally provide 70% of Cuba's annual production.



Food is an area of real concern.

The government will be holding monthly meetings to allocate food. They have a six month plan; their intention is to plant now the fastest growing crops to try and replace some of what has been lost while also planting what would normally be going into the ground at this stage of the cycle.

A foreign observer said that the government will buy overseas whatever it needs – even if that means suspending its investments in development – to make sure the Cuban population has food. The government is also taking strong action against price gouging; we toured a familiar farmer's market that had newly hung signs that told consumers what their rights are.

Supplies appear to be down, but we were told by Cuban consumers repeatedly that prices have not risen (reports appeared since the trip echoing concerns about price increases).



A Cuban family counts its remaining beans.

When we walked into the home of Miguel Martinez² in Viñales, we came upon three women in the house counting their remaining black beans and examining each of them to be sure they could still be consumed. They depended on orange, grapefruit, beans, and coffee grown on their property for their food security. Much of this had been destroyed. We can only imagine how many thousands of families are experiencing similar losses.

During our travels from Havana to Pinar Del Rio and back, we saw countless homes completely leveled or left standing without roofs. Cuba is seeking permission from the United States to buy housing materials on credit. While there is uncertainty about the absolute number of Cubans who have lost their homes, there is no doubt that this is a critical need.

Aspects of Cuba's reform program have now taken on a greater urgency; the land transfer law that was adopted by the National Assembly in July is now being implemented aggressively. 47% of Cuba's arable land lies fallow. The law provides that state-owned land can now be offered to private persons. It is a long term offer (without the transfer of title). While the people will not own the land, and they will have all of the rights of ownership, they must use it to produce food – crops or cattle. 60% of the land released in the last week will work for farming, and 40% will work for cattle. Under this program, 5,000 Cuban citizens have already applied for land. The hurricanes accelerated this process.

3. Roles of Raúl and Fidel

Fidel Castro, replaced by Raúl as president and long absent from public view, has reemerged as an active government voice on hurricane relief. He is increasing the number of "reflections," op-ed columns published in state media, and his exhortations have reappeared on public billboards in Cuba, including outside of Havana.

² See our video interview with Mr. Martinez at <http://democracyinamericas.org/gallery>. A transcript appears on pages 11-13 of this report.



“We will continue developing solidarity, our greatest resource inside and outside of the homeland.”

[Note: this message is signed by Fidel]

Raúl Castro, always a behind the scenes player, was cited in the international media for not playing a public role. But his presence was felt through the deployment of the Cuban military and senior government officials out visiting communities. Raúl was directing the response, Cubans said, and then emerged later in targeted visits to some of the hardest hit places. One Cuban said to us, “Raúl, by example, is showing that he is different.”

In the past, Fidel was there, visible. Today, Raúl is not there. But his top people are there. On visits through the island they have sent one top official accompanied by a 2nd layer of Politburo members. Importantly, they were prepared. When the hurricane was approaching, they were prepared; they were there, prepositioned. After the hurricane left, they were there. The responses were rapid. The armed forces were all over. Raúl sent messages. Now that recovery – and reconstruction – is happening, Raúl is starting to come out. His is a collegial style and the message is action. **Comments to the delegation from a Cuban party member.**

4. Who is helping Cuba?

Within days of the hurricanes, foreign governments had responded with commitments. Many Cubans talked to us about these donations: Two planeloads of supplies from Spain. Ecuador sent two shiploads of tuna, totaling ten tons of relief. Three planeloads came from Honduras. One planeload had come from Brazil. There was aid from as far away as China and nearby Mexico. Russia, an outcast in Cuba since its withdrawal of support from the island after the Cold War, sent 4 planeloads and a delegation of businessmen. The government of Trinidad and Tobago had even donated a million dollars.

We encountered a woman in Los Palacios who had walked five kilometers from her home because she had heard a rumor that the Seventh Day Adventist church was passing out something. She didn't know if it was food or other supplies, but she had nothing, her house and all her possessions taken by the hurricane. She told us that Venezuela had donated aluminum cooking utensils that had been distributed the day before [Friday, September 19] in her community, La Montaña.

The Catholic Church, according to the spokesman for the Cardinal in Havana, is having unprecedented results from its consultations with the Cuban government. In talks conducted quietly, the Church has been given permission to import shiploads of donations into the country to be distributed. This is the first time the government will allow it to import goods.

There have been several meetings between Caritas Cuba and Cuban officials so far. We have never before been able to import donations from abroad, and never before been permitted to buy goods from wholesalers in Cuba. **Comments to the delegation by a spokesman for the Catholic Church**

Caritas International has a plan to distribute a package of food for one month, and hygienic goods for two months, for 100,000 Cubans, based on global contributions that are coming in now. On the island, Caritas has 3,000 volunteers emanating from the churches and chapels coordinating with Popular Power representatives to coordinate aid.

Cuba's government and the United States, however, are still at a diplomatic impasse over what the United States can do to help through official channels. Cuba has repeatedly turned down official offers of humanitarian aid from the United States and it has asked our government to allow it to purchase housing reconstruction materials on credit. To date, this request has been rejected by our government.

No Cubans we spoke to complained about or even mentioned the lack of an official US response, even though President Castro editorialized about it and the Cuban government is apparently making no secret of the fact that it turned down \$5 million (now \$6.3 million) from the US.

Still, the United States seems conspicuous by its absence among the members of the international community who are participating in the response. It is no surprise that Venezuela and Cuba's other neighbors are responding, but for those in the Executive Branch and the Congress who are concerned with balance of power issues in the region, they should take note that Russia and China are participating in hurricane relief. And, due to the embargo, US businesses are missing out on at least a part of a \$5 billion rebuilding opportunity in Cuba.

5. Political dimensions of the crisis

The Cuban government is planning an extensive effort at the United Nations to coordinate a larger, noisier global response when the General Assembly votes on the annual resolution condemning the United States embargo on October 29, 2008. Leading the effort are Cuba's Vice President, Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, and Fernando Ramirez, a member of the Cuban Community Party Central Committee, and other top Cuban officials.

The resolution in the General Assembly is an annual occurrence, and Cuba has won a vote of condemnation in each of the last sixteen years. The debate this year should be especially dramatic and damaging to US interests, against the backdrop of the hurricanes and the inability of both governments to reach agreement on getting meaningful assistance from the United States.

It would hardly be surprising if participants in the debate repeated what U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said to an audience at Harvard University on September 21. He said the hurricanes offered a good time for the screws on the embargo to remain turned tight: "We don't want to give them a lot of breathing room at a time where we believe change will happen."

The U.S. Congress has not distinguished itself either. Legislation was introduced by Senator Dodd and Congressman Delahunt to remove temporarily restrictions on Cuban-Americans, imposed by President Bush in 2004, that limit their ability to travel to Cuba or to provide financial support to their families.

While Congress is understandably focused on the financial crisis, there is little prospect for it to pass the Dodd-Delahunt legislation before the November elections. This means that the US will not be a meaningful participant in relief efforts at this hour of critical need in Cuba – not because it can't, but because it won't.

6. Questions about a boatlift

Many Cuba observers in the US have expressed fears that a Cuban humanitarian crisis could evolve into a migration crisis like those triggered in the 1980s and 1990s. This is the “escape valve theory,” whereby Cubans would leave the island en masse in reaction to food shortages or instability. On our trip, we asked Cubans and foreign observers whether they thought this could happen. They did not.

Cubans told us that earlier boatlifts occurred because the Cuban government felt provoked or that it decided not to stop an exodus for internal political reasons. They said, politically, the last thing that the Cuban government needs now is a crisis with the US or a migration crisis that turns into a military situation. If you open the gates in Cuba, this is a national security risk. On the US side, they predicted, there would be no appetite for seeing thousands of Cubans arrive on the shores of Florida before the election.

While it is impossible to predict the future with 20/20 vision, we found the arguments persuasive that the Cuban government would regard a boatlift as a political defeat and a national security risk; that they are making significant efforts to manage this crisis to avoid unmanageable internal problems; and that the US administration would neither acquiesce to nor encourage a mass migration – for political, financial, and security reasons.

Recommendations

Cuba needs at least \$5 billion in reconstruction – including massive investment in infrastructure – a tremendous opportunity for US businesses at a time of economic crisis. Cuban intellectuals are talking about hurricane recovery as a time for new approaches in urban planning, home construction, and expanding private enterprise. The Catholic Church hopes to leverage the new opportunities it has to offer disaster relief into a greater role in Cuba on a more permanent basis. This tragedy should be a prompt for new thinking on both sides of the Florida Straits.

We should be allowing Cuba to buy housing reconstruction materials on credit. We should be allowing Cuban-Americans to support their families. Our government should emulate the Catholic Church and discretely find opportunities to cooperate with Cuba in the midst of its recovery. We are passing up a multi-billion business opportunity and an even more valuable chance for a diplomatic opening.

Unfortunately, hurricane season has coincided with the political season, and that has produced paralysis and a reliance on old habits, when thoughtful, meaningful action might start to reorder the relationship between Cuba and the United States for the long-term.

The Center for Democracy in the Americas is planning additional research trips to Cuba to follow its progress in recovering from the hurricanes. We will make additional video available on our website. We will also be examining other means, beyond legislation, to provide additional humanitarian relief to Cuba, beyond the donations we have already raised for licensed charities.

Conversations with Cubans

In Havana, we walked through neighborhoods, stopping in homes and at a popular farmers' market to inquire about living conditions, the availability of food and its prices, and to hear opinions about hurricane response and relief by the government.



Selling beans at the Cuatro Caminos farmers' market.

At the farmers' market, people were reluctant to talk. Prices did not appear jacked up, but supplies did appear to be somewhat low. There were recently hung government signs about consumer rights (anti-price-gouging).

The damage in Havana neighborhoods was less than we anticipated. A lot of government clean up had already taken place. We spoke to one family that had several feet of water in their home and moved all the family members, including a disabled grandmother, onto the second floor, with their possessions to ride out the storm.

In Havana, many of the most familiar billboards are down. The anti-Bush billboards at the airport and the US Interests Section are gone, probably blown down by the storm, and not yet replaced.

Outside Havana: We were 50 kilometers outside of Havana and started to see a number of electrical towers down and replaced by temporary structures.



The wreckage of a downed electrical tower.

In Pinar Del Rio (the city), electricity was being rationed and traffic lights were out. We saw normal activity on the street, and no severe structural damage. A bakery was open before noon and an orderly line of consumers formed outside waiting to buy bread.

From Pinar Del Rio, we went to Viñales and examined the damage at the hotel, Los Jasmines, where CDA delegations had previously stayed (the hotel is knocked out of service). There we met a campesino, Miguel Martinez, who works locally on a tobacco farm.

In Viñales, he told us, food is being distributed. The monthly ration is being doubled for 3 months. The government is providing roofing materials, but they are the lower quality black tar paper instead of those made with white cement. The black roofing materials last only two years.



Miguel Martinez examines what remains of his coffee supplies.

Miguel invited us to visit with him and his family in their home. They have rods with sheets hung to separate the three areas where seven of them sleep. We came in as three women were sorting a small pile of black beans, examining each, deciding what could be used and saved and eaten and what could not. We were served tiny cups of coffee made from coffee beans grown in their small yard. We went into the back with Miguel and observed his losses – orange, grapefruit and coffee (trees and bushes) destroyed by the storm. We were shown a firmer structure, the home of a neighbor, made from concrete blocks, where his family and others in his area rode out the storms.

Despite his losses, Miguel offered us a sense of optimism: “Farmers always have lots of energy to work. Farmers have more energy each day that goes by. The world has not ended. Houses and crops were destroyed, but we are still alive and our families are alive. We have to continue to help.”

During our visit, Miguel agreed to be interviewed on camera.

Transcript of the interview



My name is Miguel. I'm a farmer here in the valley.

Can you explain to us how the valley has been affected by the two hurricanes?

The valley is very affected by the two hurricanes. All of the trees are destroyed, houses, tobacco drying centers, the crops. Actually, in the valley, in the countryside now you can't find anything to gather and give to the people to eat.

For example, the products that are lost, what are they?

We have lost the [yuca](#), corn, malanga. We've lost fruit, all the fruit, and coffee. There was a lot of fruit here before, lots of oranges, a lot of grapefruit, avocado, guava.

In the case of lost crops, the tree is destroyed?

The tree is destroyed! We have to start over again with the planting. We have to start from scratch. Actually, not one tree was left. The only trees that were left were damaged from the wind and don't produce anymore.

And how much time is needed to start producing again?

Well, coffee takes two years from when it is planted. Avocado can take 5 years. Grapefruit can take 7, 8, 10 years.

Mamei is a typical fruit here. It takes 25 years from when it is planted to start producing. That's a long time; I'm not going to get to see it again (in my lifetime).

What are you guys doing to respond and produce again?

[We](#) farmers are trying to work a little bit [more](#) than we worked before. Since we are so affected we are working a little later into the night...with the moon. To see if we can plant what can give us food as soon as possible; what grows the fastest to benefit ourselves and benefit the people.

And what are those crops?

Sweet potato, which normally produces after 3 months. Corn, which is ready to eat after 4 months. Beans, which are ready after 3 and a half months. Sweet potato, it's very good to eat boiled or fried...to keep from going hungry.

And the help from the Government?

Up until now, they have been giving us an additional quota at the store.

That's monthly?

We get one quota each month, but now instead of one they are giving us two: rice, beans, sugar, oil, peas.

And the town of Viñales produces bread night and day. It's a very fundamental thing. If you don't have anything to eat, eat a piece of bread with sugar and, yeah.

What other help is the Government giving?

The other help of the Government is with the problem of the houses. The houses, the damages, what was damaged inside the houses.

Construction materials, mattresses that got wet, the things that got taken away in the wind. Up until now they haven't given any mattresses, but they have put together a list.

Seeds?

They can give us seeds, but it is rather difficult. It's difficult because the seeds that we use, yuca, malanga, they aren't seeds that are easily stored.

They aren't seeds that are kept refrigerated. They are kept in the countryside. It's very difficult to help us with those types of seeds.

Tobacco seeds yes. Beans, they can give us the seeds for beans. And various other things that help us.

How is the morale of the people?

Farmers always have lots of energy to work. Farmers have more energy each day that goes by. The world has not ended.

Houses and crops were destroyed, but we are still alive and our families are alive. We have to continue to help.

I think that in 6 months there will be sufficient food to eat here in the countryside. I think there will be sufficient food because we are working hard for that.

We are working for that...as long as another hurricane doesn't come, because we are in the middle of two dangerous months. These are the two dangerous months of the hurricanes.

We have never seen a hurricane in August. Never. And one of this category never. Not in August nor in any month.

My father-in-law is 96 years old and he said he remembers the hurricane from '44, which is often talked about, very talked about, but it wasn't like this one.

It wasn't as extreme as this.

From Viñales, we rode to Los Palacios, a community that suffered, according to many reports, some of the most extensive damage in the western part of Cuba. When we arrived in Los Palacios, we saw a significant amount of government activity: electrical repair, telephone repair, official trucks hauling debris. People were out on the street, some socializing, some working on cleaning up, getting water out of their homes, etc.

We interviewed several families on the streets in Los Palacios who had experienced various levels of losses: homes without roofs, homes where what negligible possessions they had were destroyed. Roofs were ripped off by Hurricane Gustav and then sheets of rain followed into their homes thanks to Hurricane Ike. This destroyed much of what they had.



A neighbor in Los Palacios stopped cleaning her home to speak with the delegation.

One family complained loudly about a neighbor who refused them –including an infant –shelter during one of the storms. This family lost its roof during Gustav. Between Gustav and Ike, the government provided roofing materials. The second storm destroyed the first replacement roof, but they got more materials for a new roof after Ike. In other houses in the same neighborhood, people are still waiting for their roofs.



What remains of a kitchen in Los Palacios.

We also talked to a woman from La Montaña. She reported that residents of her village received aluminum cooking utensils from Venezuela, pots and pans. She had come to Los Palacios, five kilometers from her home, because she heard that food or other supplies were being distributed from a Seventh Day Adventist church.

Outside the church, we met a female believer who talked about the hurricane being a test from God. She said the help from the government was insufficient; her faith was in God.

Following our stay in Los Palacios, we traveled to San Cristobal and interviewed some sugar mill workers on the street outside their homes.

On our final day in Cuba, we attended services at a Roman Catholic/Santeria church in Regla. Before our departure, we visited briefly with Gail Reed, MEDICC, to whom we made a donation of water purification tablets that she could get to the Island of Juventud.
