
Nicaragua: hurricane Mitch devastation linked to deforestation

High rates of deforestation contributed to the flash floods and mudslides which caused most casualties due to Hurricane Mitch, Central America's deadliest disaster. More than ten thousand perished, and thousands more are still missing in Nicaragua and Honduras.

According to Father Miguel d'Escoto, a member of the FSLN National Directorate, "This is the worst natural disaster in our [Nicaragua] history; even more so than the earthquake [in 1972]."

In Nicaragua every year, 150,000 hectares [approximately 375,000 acres] of forested land are destroyed by commercial timber cutting, the advancing agricultural frontier, slash and burn farming and forest fires. The country has lost nearly 60% of its forest cover in the last 50 years.

According to Jaime Incer, former Nicaraguan Minister of Natural Resources, deforestation has dried up 200 rivers and contributed to the erosion of 3 million tons of topsoil. Without tree roots to hold soil in place, heavy rains on barren hillsides cause the highly unstable soil to slide, taking with it everything and anything in its path.

Since the devastation has been linked to widespread deforestation, the Nicaragua Network Environmental Task Force is calling for an end to multinational logging ventures in the Atlantic Region of Nicaragua. The Atlantic Region has the largest intact segment of moist forest remaining in Central America. The region hosts many rare and unknown ecosystems (coastal wetland, mangrove, mid-altitude humid forests and bamboo forests and others), as well as numerous endangered species.

"In the wake of this hurricane, with all of the information coming out about the links of deforestation to the wholesale destruction we have seen in Nicaragua and Honduras, anything short of a total ban on commercial logging by multinationals in Nicaragua would be criminal," stated Mary Brook of the Nica Net ETF.

In addition, nationwide reforestation projects must be initiated. But above all, unconditional cancellation of the IMF and World Bank debts of the affected countries is imperative to allow them to focus their financial resources on their long-term recovery efforts.

Source: ACERCA, Action for Community & Ecology in the Rainforests of Central America.