More Lessons from Cuba’s Hurricane Preparedness and Civil Defense

By Elizabeth Newhouse

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Introduction

Hurricane Irene led the news in August 2011—the deadliest year for the giant storms in the United States since 2008. It killed 45 people and caused at least $7 billion in damage, mainly from flooding in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast. The year was also notable as the seventh busiest for hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean since recordkeeping began. Remarkably, Cuba, so often in their path, managed to get through the season without a hit.

Having been struck by 16 major storms in the last decade, however, Cuba never relaxes its vigilance. And, as Wayne Smith’s latest trip to Havana demonstrated, the island continues to have much to teach U.S. Gulf Coast officials about managing hurricanes and other disasters—from preparation to response to recovery. Below is a brief overview of the November 2011 delegation, which included the mayor of Galveston, Texas, and the dean of the Texas State Senate, the sixth trip in the series.

Free Medical School for Foreigners

At the Latin American Medical School (ELAM), Vice Rector Dr. Yoandra Muro Valle told the group that courses in disaster medicine are central to its curriculum. The free medical education offered by ELAM, established 12 years ago for poor Latin American youths in response to two devastating hurricanes in Central America, has now graduated 10,000 doctors from 67 countries. Their commitment is to return home and serve their communities, many of which lack medical facilities of any kind. In keeping with Cuba’s mission to assist other countries hit by disasters, more than 350 ELAM graduates, including 11 from the United States, responded to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, departing only recently.
More than a hundred American students from many regions and ethnic backgrounds are now enrolled in the school. Processed in the United States through Pastors for Peace, the United States requires applicants to have college degrees, making them older than students from other countries who come right out of high school. The curriculum is demanding (most must also learn Spanish) and internet access, free time, and spending money are severely limited. Nevertheless, Max Chancy of Orlando, Florida, a first-year student, described the opportunity as the "experience of a lifetime."

**Disaster Medicine**

A meeting at the Latin American Center for Disaster Medicine (CLAMED) hosted by its director, Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, emphasized the amount of organization that goes into preparing for disasters. When one occurs, the Center, under the Ministry of Public Health and part of the civil defense system, has responsibility for not only taking care of the injured and tending to evacuees, but also for maintaining the health of the general population and assuring the safety of all medical facilities on the island.

Although hurricanes and other major storms are the most common disasters, the Center must also worry about oil spills, chemical accidents, forest fires, and epidemics. Assessing and mitigating risk is a major part of the job. In addition, the Center oversees all disaster medical training and research in Cuba and keeps abreast of what’s going on in the field abroad, exchanging information and best practices. The Center also holds workshops and seminars and maintains a robust website. In March 2013 it will host an international Congress on Health and Disaster.

**Civil Defense in Playa**

The delegation met with civil defense officials in the 36-square-kilometer municipality of Playa, who described their goals as threefold: eliminate vulnerabilities, save lives, and save resources. As on other occasions, Francisco Sanchez Perdomo, the secretary of the provincial assembly governing the city of Havana of which Playa is a part, and Playa’s young mayor, Edelio Rodriguez Ordunez, impressed the audience with their extremely detailed assessment of the needs of Playa’s population of 177,773, as well as the condition of its 53,862 apartments and houses. When a hurricane hits, they know how many people must be protected in each category of storm: 16,314 people in a category 1 and 2 storm; 35,524 people in categories 3, 4, and 5 storms, in which case 9,470 people must be evacuated to family or friends or one of eight evacuation centers. Because Playa is also home to Cuba’s major scientific centers (as well as diplomatic residences and tourism facilities), escaping toxic substances like ammonia and chemical gas are also concerns to be dealt with. Should this happen, officials know that some 800 people have to be moved from their homes.

Because Playa includes 12.5 kilometers of coastline, sea surges are a major problem. When the sea penetrates the municipality’s streets, Mayor Rodriguez knows he has to move water pumps from 2,964 houses before they are inundated.

The success of all this preparation is clearly evident: the last five hurricanes to strike Playa produced not a single fatality.

**Low Fatality Rate**

Dr. Jose Rubiera, Cuba’s top hurricane forecaster, met the delegation at the Institute of Meteorology, across Havana Bay. He noted that while the greater incidence of hurricanes since 1995 is part of a cyclical pattern relating to ocean currents, the increasing intensity of the storms is a result of climate change. While material losses have been high, the number of casualties has been very small due to Rubiera’s early warnings and the strong civil defense system. In recent years, the United States has
suffered far more casualties from hurricanes than Cuba. Over the course of eight storms in the past eight years, there have been 44.73 deaths per million people in the U.S. and only 2.43 deaths per million people in Cuba, according to Rubiera’s calculations.

The strongly coordinated effort between his Institute, civil defense, and the media keep these numbers so low. Educating the public about hurricanes is an ongoing priority, with TV courses, national drills, workshops, seminars, instruction and contests for schoolchildren, and, for first responders, continuing reviews and procedural updates.

In close consultation with the U.S. Hurricane Center in Miami and counterparts in the Caribbean, Rubiera uses data from Cuba’s 68 meteorological stations to track the path of a storm. The goal is to begin sounding warnings 120 hours before landfall to give civil defense officials time to prepare and to build awareness among Cubans. As a hurricane approaches, Rubiera himself appears regularly on television to explain clearly its course and risks. He has done this so often over the years, he’s become something of a TV celebrity.

**Relationship in Paralysis**

A meeting at the Foreign Ministry with Johana Tablada de la Torre, Deputy Director of the North American Division, brought the delegation up to date on Cuba’s view of U.S. policy. To the Cubans, according to Tablada, President Obama has been a disappointment, and the relationship is in “paralysis.” While Obama did some positive things in liberalizing travel and remittances, he has not taken up Cuba’s proposal to discuss issues of bilateral importance: the environment, migration, drug interdiction, and trade. Indeed, he has been tougher than the Bush Administration in applying penalties for infractions of the embargo, according to Tablada.

On the subject of the imprisoned CIA contractor Alan Gross, Tablada made clear that he will not be released unilaterally. If there is to be a humanitarian gesture, it must be reciprocal. Cuban public opinion will not tolerate anything else, she said.

Especially galling to the Cubans is the White House’s refusal to acknowledge the important changes taking place in Cuba, especially the amnesty granted to political prisoners. “We are changing our system to make it more efficient, democratic, and connected to the world,” she said. “We have many challenges, but we will continue to move in this direction regardless of what the United States does.”

**View from the Interests Section**

The trip’s final meeting was with Deputy Chief of Mission Charles Barclay at the U.S. Interests Section on Havana’s Malecon. Where Tablada used the world “paralysis” to describe the state of U.S.-Cuba relations, Barclay called it “glacial.” He pointed out that 80 percent of the conversation about the embargo is among Americans, only 20 percent between Americans and Cubans.

Since interest group politics drives the Cuba policy, Barclay said that President Obama has taken significant political risks in the liberalizations he has made. U.S. values are a factor in not moving further, Barclay asserted. While acknowledging a double standard, the United States is looking for a greater tolerance for dissent and for a discussion of political change comparable to the economic changes now underway.

Those changes show that the Cuban government has decided to move beyond the socialist model. It is trying to open up agriculture to produce more food and the real estate market as a channel to use Cuban-American money more effectively. But are these and the other changes based on ideology or simply tactical? Many questions remain.
Barclay expressed doubt that Cuba will be removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism anytime soon, suggesting that involvement with Colombia’s FARC is a factor.

The dissident movement is static, Barclay said. It is made up of about 5,000 mostly older former government functionaries and young tech-savvy bloggers, who cannot publicly express themselves in a way that reaches ordinary Cubans. They are constantly harassed or worse by a “bully regime.” Because the Interests Section engages with the dissidents, it is effectively barred from engaging with the broader civil society, Barclay noted.

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**DELEGATION PARTICIPANTS**

1. **Joe Jaworski**, Mayor of Galveston.
2. **Senator John Harris Whitmire**, Dean of the Texas State Senate.
3. **John Gregory Manlove**, former Mayor of Pasadena, Texas.
4. **Nick Kralj**, a member of the Galveston County Beach Erosion Task Force (TX).
5. **Elliot Kralj**, a member of the Galveston County Beach Erosion Task Force (TX).
6. **Dr. Wayne Smith**, senior fellow at CIP and Cuba Project director.
8. **Laura Muth**, CIP Cuba intern.

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