

Hurricane Eta Relief

by Ted Smoker

Greetings from Guatemala.

Last week, Hurricane Eta caused 6 straight days of heavy rain. Our area, Alta Verapaz, suffered some of the most widespread damage in Guatemala. Rivers flooded many areas in town, immersed bridges, and destroyed many communities, stores, and shopping centers.

We're thankful that the sun has been shining for the last 4 days. The rivers have gone down, lifting the spirits of some of those who are cleaning up. Front loaders are scooping up piles of muddy store supplies and waterlogged mattresses onto trucks to go to the overwhelmed garbage dump.

Although things are slowly going back to normal in town, many people in the villages continue to suffer. The Guatemalan landscape consists of steep mountains and deep valleys. As the rivers swelled, they filled some of these valleys with lakes--and now that the rivers have receded, the water is trapped with nowhere to go.



The village of Sacsii Chitaña 6 days after the rain stopped.



Distributing food to those who lost everything.

As a result, Sacsii Chitaña, a village we visit regularly, found itself completely covered in water. The pictures above may make it look like a beautiful, tranquil lake until you realize there are homes buried under those 50 feet of water. You can see rooftops peeking above the water, but they betray the true depth of the lake. Those houses were lifted off their foundations and now float on the surface.

About 60 families in that community lost everything and now, a week after they fled their homes, they are still waiting for the waters to go down. They have found refuge in churches and schools and are reliant on their neighboring communities to bring them prepared food, supplies, prayer, and moral support. Four Mennonite churches in the Sacsii area were affected.

Campur is a more distant village that has suffered the same as Sacsii. The same is true of villages in Frey las Casas, Chisec, and many others, including neighborhoods of Chamelco near Bezaleel, the Mennonite Boarding school. We are currently hosting 20 families, or about 200 people, in the upper dorms of the school.



Bezaleel School

The Bezaleel school itself was flooded and everything stored in the ground floors was damaged. That includes the teachers' office, one dorm room, the maintenance buildings, and the big assembly room. The benches in the assembly room, the marimba, some keyboards, the speakers, the teachers' desks, and some closets all look to be very damaged. It is dry now, but we will wait until December to go through the process of deciding what can be salvaged or discarded.

We are also concerned about the structural damage that might have occurred to the assembly room. Some of the fill that supports the floor washed away in the flood.

Thanks to God most of the dorm rooms and the main offices are on the second floor. The computers and office equipment should still be in good shape. Santiago, the president of the Kek'chi' Mennonite Church, and a good friend of ours, who is a missionary with the Assembly of God Church, worked together to save the computers on Friday as the waters were rising.



Distributing food and supplies in Saqija



Our Work

I work with both the K'ekchi' Mennonite Church as well as with ODIGUA, an organization that works closely with communities in the region. This disaster has required us and nationwide NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to cooperate and make sure we provide for the extraordinary needs of our region.

We have been very busy visiting the communities, assessing the needs, and providing supplies and MCC kits to families that have suffered. In the coming weeks and months when the waters finally recede, there will need to be a huge effort to rebuild. I'm sure there is an opportunity for work teams to come down from the United States and provide this ministry.

Another more urgent need we have noticed is the skirts and blouses of the K'ekchi' women. If you have seen pictures of the K'ekchi', you may have noticed the particular way the women dress in colorful woven fabric. This typical dress is an important part of their culture, being one of the few things that provide dignity and pride for the K'ekchi' women. These clothes are unfortunately only made and sold in our area. Although we've already received helpful resources and supplies from organizations such as MCC, these skirts and blouses are not easily provided and can be expensive for those with scarce resources. They cost around \$25 each. We'd like to be able to provide at least 150-200 of them in total.

How Can You Help?

Please pray with us. Pray for restoration and blessing for the people who have suffered, and for safety for those who are working tirelessly in this work. Covid cases are growing in our region but people have braved the risk to provide for those in great need. Pray that we will be spared from further devastating effects from Hurricane Iota, which seems to be developing the same as Eta and may arrive early in the week. Pray for peace and patience and for differences to be reconciled as many different communities and organizations work together.

Consider with prayer how you can help. We are working closely with MCC Guatemala/El Salvador and you can donate directly at: <https://donate.mcc.org/cause/hurricane-eta-relief>

If you would like to collect money for the skirts and blouses, let me know. We will know soon where those funds can be sent. We may have a designated fund set up with MCC.

Reconstruction will continue for many weeks or months to come. If you can organize a team to come down in the future, we will provide information and logistics for doing so.

May the Lord recompense you as you consider your K'ekchi' brothers and sisters. They are a people that have very little and have always relied on each other when many hard times have hit. Now many communities and families have lost everything and have nowhere else to turn.

Please prayerfully consider how God may be leading you to help those in need. Feel free to share all or part of this message with your church congregation or others that would be interested.

Thank you so much for your faithfulness in prayer!

Ways to connect with us:
Our blog: tedsmoker.com
EMM: emm.org/how-to-give



Email: jasmaker@gmail.com
Facebook: facebook.com/servingthekekchi
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