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Acapulco's Unending Nightmare

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Embark on an Exploration of Corruption, Catastrophe, and Courage in Mexico

In the wake of Hurricane Otis' devastating strike on Acapulco, the beach paradise found itself thrust into a nightmarish ordeal. The storm's destructive force triggered the vulnerabilities deeply embedded in Mexico's disaster response mechanisms, exposing a complex web of stresses, including corruption and government inefficiencies. Cascade Institute's Gabriela Vieyra-Balboa delves into the heart of the matter, peeling back layers of systemic issues that extend far beyond the aftermath of a single natural disaster.

Shedding light on the controversial decision to dismantle FONDEN, a critical resource meant for disaster management, the author reveals a paradoxical reality where, despite promises to combat corruption, the current administration under President Andrés Manuel López-Obrador (AMLO) seems entangled in a web of questionable business dealings regarding the allocation of resources and the aid reaching the disaster-stricken populace.

Against the backdrop of bureaucratic shortcomings and political maneuvering, Dr. Vieyra-Balboa interweaves stories of human resilience featuring the victims of Hurricane Otis, their struggles, and the promises of aid, which capture the stark contrast between official declarations and the ground realities. Follow the link and embark on an exploration that transcends headlines and challenges our perceptions.

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On Wednesday, October 25, 2023, at 00:25 hrs., category five hurricane Otis made landfall at Acapulco, the beautiful beach destination in the Mexican state of Guerrero, where my mother was born and where I spent nearly every summer of my childhood. Sadly, it is not the first time that The Pearl of the Pacific has endured hurricanes, so, at first, I thought its impact would be similar, albeit slightly more severe, than any of the previous storms, but I was wrong. It destroyed Acapulco entirely.

The wind and rain brought by Otis caused damage to almost every building and home. Otis ripped full water tanks and AC units from multiple roofs; massive trees, power poles, and towering billboards fell, leaving most of the city without electricity or telephone lines. The mighty hotels facing the ocean, which used to withstand, unharmed, every previous storm thanks to the bay's protection, were now reduced to shambles. The affectations weren't only cosmetic, consisting of broken windows and fallen light fixtures; this time, they sustained visible structural damage. The newest and most exclusive tourist zone, Punta Diamante, developed during the 1990s and increasingly attractive to foreigners willing to own a little piece of heaven—a condo within gated communities—, was also brutally hit. Local authorities estimated that at least 80% of the hospitality infrastructure was severely damaged, which heralded, right before the holiday season, the collapse of the tourism industry on which the region heavily relies (Yañez, 2023). Unlike past weather events when the region's poorest, most vulnerable areas concentrated the worst damage, Otis disregarded social and economic status. It destroyed everything, from luxury hotels and villas to the humblest irregularly built homes. It will take years to restore it all.

Tragically, the week after Otis's arrival, Acapulco became a nightmare their inhabitants couldn't wake up from. With all main roads shut down due to flooding and landslides and all communication infrastructure collapsed, people -including 40,000 foreign nationals- were

uncommunicated and without essential services for days on end before the first signs of governmental aid and presence started trickling in during the weekend. Amidst accusations of flagrant ineptitude of the local led by Governor Evelyn Salgado (from the MORENA party) and federal government spearheaded by President Andres Manuel Lopez-Obrador (a.k.a. AMLO, founder of MORENA), who mockingly downplayed the impacts of the storm in his morning conferences, the state of law and order broke down. While authorities and the armed forces struggled to access the disaster area, the population ran out of food, bottled water, medicines, baby formula and diapers, personal hygiene products and cleaning supplies. Soon, every store, big and small, was violently raided and looted.

Dreading hunger and thirst, people ransacked the grocery stores. And, with no private security services or police officers in sight, it didn't take long for mobs to escalate, breaking into every commercial establishment to steal clothes and linens, beds and mattresses, toys, video games, flat-screen TVs, home theatres, patio and office furniture, Halloween costumes and even Christmas decorations. Within hours, only empty racks with destroyed merchandise turned into tons of garbage, left behind among pools of melted ice cream and the stench of food rotting in powerless fridges. Eventually, stores weren't enough; private homes also became targets for the looters. Locals believe these thefts were orchestrated and executed by organized crime, not by desperate ordinary people. Civil order collapsed, and scenes that seemed taken out of *The Walking Dead* or *The Last of Us* erupted all over town. Instead of the solidarity narratives that Mexicans have proudly been known for in previous adverse circumstances, media outlets featured stories of Acapulqueños denouncing they now feared their neighbours. As some wreaked havoc, many more refused to partake in the pillage, feeling abandoned by the forces of order and powerless to stop the madness.

Among all this tragedy, my mom's 72-year-old sister was home alone when the hurricane hit. Although she was unharmed and her condo suffered no damages (her building did, though), she was among the millions who were left with no water, electricity, gas, or food to keep on going. Everything in her fridge went bad, and her reserve of canned goods was beginning to. Severed communication infrastructure kept her isolated from all other family members in the region, and her cell phone battery died by Tuesday after the intermittent signal allowed her to let us know she was okay. Until Friday, she called my brother in Mexico City through a neighbour's phone, which miraculously had a signal.

Despite the fear and the knowledge that Acapulco was and still is a disaster zone, as soon as my brother heard that the highway had opened and that some people were going into the area to evacuate their loved ones, he and his wife decided to go and rescue my aunt. All I could do to help was to send a message to my aunt via WhatsApp and Facebook, hoping she could see them, telling her: "My brother is headed for Acapulco right now to get you. If you see this, stay at home. He'll pick you up there. Pack your bags." They left Mexico City on Sunday at 9:30 a.m.

I've never had any heroes, but my baby brother and sister-in-law are now the heroes I look up to. Four hours out from Acapulco, every gas station had run out of fuel, so they had to bring their reserves for the journey. News of highwaymen assaulting evacuees started reaching Mexico City. Instead of my mom's SUV, they took their unassuming sedan, hoping they would not attract crooks looking for money, supplies, fuel, or a fresh car to leave Guerrero. Were they being paranoid? Let's put it this way: when we were children, whenever we travelled to Acapulco, my dad always brought his gun in the car, concealed in a box of Kleenex. Luckily, he never had to use it. Yet, despite the construction of a much better highway in the 1990s, I was mugged on my way back to Mexico on a regular weekend night around 2001. Add years of

organized crime, generalized poverty, and lack of state presence in the region, plus a natural disaster of this magnitude, and you have the perfect scenario of a genuine life-threatening road trip. My family could've been mugged anywhere and anytime during that journey, but miraculously, they weren't. They got to my aunt's building by 2:15 p.m. and returned by 8:30 p.m. That night, they slept in the safety of their own home with my aunt as a guest. Although she'll have to deal with whatever happens with her property sometime in the future, she's out of danger. In the following days, I learned that my aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces also left Acapulco in exile, heading to nearby Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo and Cancun. None have returned home since then. They, too, are safe, but millions of men, women and children are still there, fending on their own with the sequels from this tragedy.

As previously mentioned, Acapulco has a long story of tropical storms that have left scars on its landscape and collective memory. The most dangerous was Paulina, which landed on October 8, 1997, and was ranked category four on the Saffir-Simpson scale, with raging winds of 215-240 km/h (133-149 m/h) and 411 mm (16 inches) of rain within five hours (Matías Ramírez, 1998; Zainos, 2023). The Mexican authorities reported 230 casualties, while the Red Cross estimated that at least 400 lives were lost (Lawrence, 1997). Over 300,000 people lost their homes, and damages were calculated then at around 7.5 billion USD.

Sixteen years later, in September 2013, category 1 Ingrid, from the Gulf of Mexico, collided with its sibling, Manuel, a tropical storm born in the Pacific that eventually reached category 1. The 157 people who died in this double disaster were not victims of the wind (140 km/h, 85 mph). Most of them perished due to the 380 mm (15 inches) of rain that unleashed massive floods and landslides. Guerrero wasn't the only state affected this time, but it absorbed

three-quarters of Ingrid and Manuel's impacts, calculated at that time between 5.4 and 7.5 billion USD (Ramos, 2023).

Yet, despite all previous destruction, the people of Acapulco who have rendered their testimony through social media and mainstream media outlets in its aftermath coincide: Otis has been the worst and most devastating disaster they have ever experienced. But why? What changed? Is this just a matter of selective memory, or are there concomitant factors aggravating this disaster, turning it into a Petri dish for a polycrisis scenario?

Let's start with Otis itself. This hurricane monster earned its category five ranking on the Saffir-Simpson scale due to sustained winds of more than 252 km/h (156 mph) or higher. However, sources report it exceeded the minimum requirement to get its badge. It reached roaring bursts of 315 km/h (195 mph) and 330 km/h (205 mph) (BBC News Mundo, 2023), plus 249 mm (9.8 inches) of precipitation. The scale describes the potential damages of such winds as catastrophic, a proper adjective to describe what Guerrero has experienced. Off-the-charts warmth in the oceans associated with anthropogenic climate change and the El Niño phenomenon set the perfect conditions for Otis to intensify faster than any tropical cyclone observed in the Eastern Pacific Ocean (Dance, 2023). Standard monitoring revealed that Acapulco could expect a tropical storm, including heavy rain that night. But in the words of David Gelles and Manuela Andreoni (2023), it "metastasized" in only 12 hours, twice as fast as any other hurricane.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this was a gargantuan weather event, so, understandably, the emergency rescue and recovery efforts weren't as expedited and abundant as needed. Still, as Lawrence et al. (2023) point out, Otis is a crisis, a trigger that found a fertile soil of social, political, economic, legal, and environmental stressors to unleash a polycrisis. Let's take a closer

look at some of those stressors. Hours after Otis's landfall, while victims struggled with its aftermath, conversations in the rest of the country pointed to the disappearance of Mexico's Fund for Natural Disasters (FONDEN). In October 2020, after the Congress, dominated by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's party, Morena voted to dissolve 109 semi-independent government trust funds (*fideicomisos*), including FONDEN.

Historically, it was conceived after the infamous 8.1-degree earthquake that shattered Mexico City on September 19, 1985, killing around 20,000 people. It started operating in 1996, with resources streaming from two primary sources: 0.4% of the yearly federal budget (in 2011, this represented 800 million USD according to the World Bank (2012)) and market-based risk transfer instruments, including insurance and catastrophe (CAT) bonds. Mexico was the first country to use the World Bank's MultiCat program, issuing its first CAT bond for 290 million USD in 2009 (Banco Mundial, 2012; Helfgott, 2021). The fund was no small peanuts, and it allowed Mexico to respond to natural disasters and to "build back better" to prevent future tragedies through the Fund for Disaster Prevention (FOPREDEN), a secondary account to FONDEN, focusing on disaster "reduction and prevention through risk assessment and reduction efforts" (Helfgott, 2021).

In the past, as soon as the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB) issued a disaster declaration, immediate resources would be liberated to assist the affected population in three ways: i) supplies and medicines to help the population in the emergency; ii) partial immediate support for the execution of emergent actions, tasks and priority and urgent repairs iii) down payments and expenses for housing and federal infrastructure reconstruction. FONDEN then started 24 processes for emergency attention and 24 more for reconstruction, in which almost 20 governmental instances participated, under the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior

(SEGOB) 's General Direction for Risk Management (DGGR) and the Ministry of Finances and Public Credit (SHCP) 's Unit of Policy and Budgetary Control (UPCP). However, FONDEN had considerable opportunities due to its complex architecture, which often led to delays and lack of transparency in the emergency attention and reconstruction process. Yet, as Mexico issues multiple declarations of emergency and disaster each year, the need for its existence was unquestionable, and improving its effectiveness was a challenge any government charged with executing it had to address.

AMLO built his popularity on the promise of fighting against the cancer-like corruption that has undoubtedly eroded every institution, political and social capital in Mexico, and by pledging to give back to the people the wealth and power taken away from them by domestic and foreign neoliberal elites led by rival Institutional Revolutionary (PRI) and National Action (PAN) parties. This platform earned him the presidency, which he took over on December 1, 2018, and an undisputed majority of Congress for his National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) party.

Sadly, corruption hasn't declined but escalated under his leadership. In 2020, the federal government needed more public funds to deal with a poorly managed crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; hence, it caught the President's attention (Balbino, 2023). According to the Centre of Studies of Public Finances (CPEF) of the Cámara de Diputados (the lower chamber of the Mexican legislature), based on information from SHCP by the end of September 2020, FONDEN had resources available for 30.4 billion pesos MXN (1.76 billion USD). It ceased operations on July 27, 2021, and by the end of 2021, the same source reported that it had only 53.4 million pesos MXN (3.1 million USD) left. (Aristegui Noticias, 2023; Centro de Estudios de las Fianzas Publicas, 2022; Villanueva, 2023).

My first question is, where did the money go? And my second is, why extinguish such a vital resource given the number of natural disasters Mexico experiences yearly? AMLO and his party claimed that public officials were pillaging the fund. He declared that during President Enrique Peña-Nieto's term (PRI), "there was a whole constellation of companies around FONDEN which sold (the government) everything from tin roofs to food and cots. It was a typical case of corruption, where they used people's disgrace to steal, buying things at the highest prices or not even buying them, but taking the money and presenting false invoices while not paying anything to the people" (Durán & Buendía, 2023).

One of the critical actors associated with corruption within FONDEN was José María Tapia, the fund's director under Peña-Nieto's government. While Hurricanes Ingrid and Manuel were fast approaching Mexican shores, photos of Tapia partying in Las Vegas appeared in social and mainstream media, and witnesses declared seeing him place 20-thousand-dollar bets at the Baccarat tables. Senator Alejandro Encinas (Morena), a well-known AMLO supporter and former collaborator, condemned his excesses, among the many errors in how the government handled the crisis, as acts of "omission and criminal negligence" (Senado de la Republica, 2013). Of course, he was never sanctioned, and instead, he was ratified in his position (Durán & Buendía, 2023).

But corruption in Mexico is not exclusive to just one political party; this is not a story of good guys and bad guys. Fast forward to 2020, with AMLO in the Presidency and the pandemic in its darkest moments. According to Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity (MCCI), Tapia created and was the majority shareholder of a company called Integral Solutions in Disaster Risk Management, which signed a millionaire contract with the Ministry of Defense (SEDENA) on March 30, 2020, as part of their DN-III plan to tackle the public health crisis. The firm sold 1330

ventilators for COVID patients for 35,000 USD. However, the company declared a value of 18,000 USD to Customs, and MCCI found the manufacturer's quote to Tapia's company, which amounted to 16,000 USD. In other words, Taipa sold the ventilators at a 123% higher price. When Customs reported inconsistencies in the documentation, SEDENA imposed a sanction of 61 million pesos. The Unit of Financial Intelligence (UIF) accused Tapia's company of money laundering and turned the case over to the Organized Crime Specialized Prosecution (FEMDO)(Barajas, 2022; Durán & Buendía, 2023).

However, it all seems to be water under the bridge. In July 2023, Tapia quit PRI, and by August, he announced his new political project. He joined the Green Party (PVEM) and is now openly aspiring to the municipal presidency of the city of Queretaro, representing a coalition of the PVEM, the Labour Party (PT) and Morena itself, with full support from Claudia Sheinbaum, the current candidate to the country's presidency for the 2024 election, and AMLO's protégé (Durán & Buendía, 2023).

The President pushed to dismantle FONDEN to combat corruption, but his government and party keep doing business and collaborating with the same people they blame for it. The more I dig into the sewers of the irregularities around FONDEN, the more inclined I am to agree with the President for the first time. Yes, it was riddled with corruption. But those who ruled the country under PRI and PAN are the same people currently in power, condemning the past they built from behind new flags like those of MORENA, PVEM, and every other political party now making alliances as new elections approach. FONDEN was born under President Ernesto Zedillo (PRI). Still, after him, there have been two PAN presidents (Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón), another PRI (Enrique Peña-Nieto), and now one from MORENA, all of them rising to power on the promise of breaking away from the past and ending Mexico's most significant burden. But

none of these governments and parties are blameless when it comes to corruption. Nothing has changed.

AMLO correctly observed that something had to be done. However, instead of analyzing and improving the resource allocation mechanism to fight against corruption, his government disappeared FONDEN and centralized all its resources. But his is by no means a clean slate. According to MCCI, “an analysis of the audits to the fund showed that there were anomalies for 347.5 billion pesos, out of which 286 billion were not justified, the equivalent of 83% of the total, according to reports by the Superior Audit of the Federation (ASF) in the 2012 to 2019 exercises” (Durán & Buendía, 2023). None of these irregularities have been thoroughly investigated, and no one has been held accountable. So, if according to official records, FONDEN had 1.76 billion USD by September 2020, and in October 2023 it has 1.04 billion USD available for disaster management, there’s a 750.5 million USD gap, were those resources pillaged by crooks or did the government funnel those resources straight into alleviating the suffering of disaster victims nationwide? —the answer, sadly, is a bit more complex.

For 2021, the National Centre for Disaster Prevention (CENAPRED) reported that Mexico issued 53 emergency and disaster declarations; 81.8% corresponded to hydrometeorological phenomena, including Grace, Nora, Olaf, Pamela and Rick, which collectively took the lives of 118 people and caused damages for over 13.8 billion pesos MXN (803 million USD). For 2022, CENAPRED calculated losses of around 13.5 billion pesos (785 million USD) due to hydrometeorological phenomena, including hurricanes Alex, Karl and Matthew, which account for 81% of the 26 declarations of emergency and disaster and 123 deaths. If we include geological, chemical, sanitary and socio-organizational disasters contemplated in the CENAPRED reports, Mexico had total losses estimated at 15.3 billion MXN

(890 million USD) in 2021 and 16.6 billion MXN (964 million USD) for 2022 (CENAPRED, 2021, 2022). Please keep these numbers in mind. Even if every cent was transparently invested in alleviating the losses caused by natural disasters, no fund could cover it all. It would be naïve to think that a contingency fund can offset every damage. Still, the narrative from the government since the extinction of FONDEN has emphasized that there are enough resources to address natural disasters, and President Lopez Obrador insists, “We’re catering to the victims of disasters better than ever” (Lagos, 2023).

According to journalist Antonio López from El Universal (2023), for both periods (2021-22), the federal government contemplated a budget of 17.7 billion pesos (1.3 billion USD) for addressing natural disasters, plus 800 million pesos (23 million USD) for reconstruction, distributed as follows. For 2021, the government budgeted 8.7 billion pesos MXN (507 million USD), which is quite a decent amount that would suffice to jumpstart the affected areas, get them on their feet and carry on. Then, in the months after a disaster stroke, the program succeeding FOPREDEN, which had 400 million pesos MXN (23 million USD) budgeted for the year, would kick in and “build back better” (Helfgott, 2021). However, not a single penny was disbursed; at the end of the year, all these resources were centralized back into TESOFE (Federal Treasury).

Then again, in 2022, the federal government budgeted 9 billion pesos MXN (2.3 million USD) for disaster and emergency purposes but only spent 1.6 billion pesos MXN (98 million USD) towards that end. Out of the 400 million MXN (23 million USD) budget for prevention and reconstruction that year, not a single peso was put towards its original purpose, and again, all the money was sent back to TESOFE. In synthesis, 2021-2022 looked like this:

Losses: 31.9 billion MXN (1.85 billion USD).

Budget: 17.7 billion MXN (1.03 billion USD)

Expenditure: 1.6 billion MXN (98 million USD)

Reabsorbed into TESOFE: 16.1 billion MXN (935 million USD)

What is going on? Why is the money returning to governmental arcs, and what happens to it afterward? It seems like the FONDEN's obscure resource allocation processes of the past became even darker under new management. In the aftermath of Hurricane Agatha in May 2021, AMLO declared (Arista, 2021) that unlike in past times, "support money will be given directly to those victims, there's no intermediation, because there were organizations that profited in times of need. Now the procedure starts with a door-to-door census so that we can have the number of affected homes and, from it, decisions will be made to help". Censusing the affected population is hardly an innovative idea. During the administrations of Presidents Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña-Nieto, the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU) was charged with identifying and registering the fund's beneficiaries. But with the extinction of FONDEN and its management procedures, there's no clarity on who will execute the census in the aftermath of the disaster, which mechanisms for transparency and accountability will exist, what criteria will regulate the apportion of resources and who will make those decisions the President spoke of. Moreover, how long would that take? It seems like the process is long enough for the fiscal year to run its course without the government disbursing money for natural disaster relief.

From the victims' perspective, the President's discourse reverberates as an insult in an echo chamber. When Hurricane Grace (August 13-21, 2021) destroyed the home of 70-year-old Minerva Suárez in Veracruz, she spent 20,000 MXN (1,162 USD) to buy 22 aluminum sheets to repair her roof after she and her 95-year-old mother spent eight days living in complete exposure. She was confident she would receive, as the President had assured them, the governmental aid

since her property was already included in the post-disaster census. AMLO promised to give each of the 64,513 families affected 35,000 pesos MXN (2,034 USD) from the 2.4 billion MXN (143 million USD) purse destined for Grace. However, one month later, the Ministry of Wellbeing told her she had not been chosen in the draw, and since she had already repaired her home, she wasn't eligible for support anymore.

Protests by victims of Hurricane Grace, still waiting for the promised aid, erupted in late 2021. A group of people from Castillo de Teayo, Minerva's hometown, whose properties were not censused, retained an employee of the Ministry of Wellbeing; victims in Papantla protested before that organism's headquarters in Veracruz and others awaiting governmental aid shut down the highway between Gutiérrez Zamora and Poza Rica, while another group interrupted the President himself in a public event in the neighbouring state of Puebla to plea for help.

However, as Antonio López's research suggests, that money will never arrive. In an interview with Daniel Gutiérrez Gutiérrez of the Budgetary Commission of the Camara de Diputados, López discovered that all resources from the disaster fund not disbursed by the end of the year go back to TESOFE. Once there, the President has the faculty, supported by the Federal Law of Budget and Financial Responsibility, to reallocate the money into strategic and priority projects. As such, the 16.1 billion MXN (935 million dollars) from the disaster fund and the 800 million (46.5 million USD) meant for reconstruction and prevention never made it to the victims of the many natural disasters that wrecked Mexico in 2021-2022. They were destined for special projects spearheaded by the President. Among them are the [Mayan Train](#), the oil refinery of [Dos Bocas](#), the [Felipe Angeles Airport](#), and the long overdue [Interurban Train](#) projected to run between Toluca and Mexico City. So, while only 9.6% of the disaster funds were used to cope with the losses of natural disasters, valuable resources are being funnelled into the President's

pet projects. These true money pits share common features: they're flagrantly overbudgeted, way overdue, they're still non-operational, and they don't provide any practical solutions to the challenges Mexico faces regarding climate change, energetic security, trade, communications, transportation, or any of the SDGs. He's burning the country out instead of building its resilience for multiple trials ahead.

Furthermore, Gutierrez insisted that the practice of reallocating the funds at the end of the year is additionally covered by a Stabilization Fund, which aims to accumulate 150 billion pesos in 2024 to complement any contingent needs the country should experience. So, in other words, AMLO has an endless purse to feed his greed and megalomaniac ego at the expense of the Mexican population, especially those left in the most vulnerable circumstances.

Now, Otis hit right on time to make its mark in the 2024 election, where Mexicans will elect 128 senators, 500 congressmen and women, and one President of the Republic. Donning the official colours of the MORENA party, which coincide with those of the Government of Mexico, [flyers](#) have started appearing in the 47 municipalities impacted by Otis. To be included in the census and considered among the aid-deserving victims, people must "Wait for the brigades of *servants of the nation* at your home and have your official identification and CURP at hand." In practice, the go-to official ID for any Mexican citizen is their electoral ID card, issued by the National Electoral Institute, which is an asset for any political party in electoral times. CURP is an individual Unique Population Registry Code, like the social security number in the US or the SIN in Canada. Both are pieces of personal information that should be carefully handled. Where will that information end up in these politically turbulent times? Think the worst, and you won't be far wrong, as my grandma used to say. In case you were wondering, the phrase Servant of the Nation is what Jose Maria Morelos y Pavon, one of the Independence war heroes,

used to call himself. The current federal government has decided to use the phrase to designate any public servant, thus layering their investiture with a varnish of heroism and self-sacrifice.

Just as the PRI used the green, white and red of the flag in its logo, Morena has continued the traditional association of the government's colours with those of the political party in office, which can lead people to assume that the resources to rebuild their homes (if they ever receive any) were given by the party, as a gift, out of their merciful heart, instead of as a right, guaranteed and honoured by the governmental institutions entrusted to public servants to fulfill their duty and administer public funds with honesty and fairness.

The morning after Otis devastated Acapulco, Undersecretary of Finance and Public Credit Gabriel Yorio announced, on behalf of the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit (SHCP) (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 2023), that there were 25 billion MXN (1.43 million USD) left in FONDEN by the time its resources were centralized to TESOFE (Federal Treasury) in July 2021. He insisted that the resources to mitigate the impacts of disasters like Otis didn't disappear after the congressional decision. On the contrary, Mexico now has a "Program for the Fund of Natural Disasters" —the new name the AMLO administration gave to the late FONDEN—, which has 18 billion MXN (1.04 billion USD) set apart for emergencies. Plus, the country "has an additional coverage through Catastrophe Insurance for 5,000 million MXN (290.5 million USD) for 2023-2024 and that a Catastrophe (CAT) Bond for 2020-2024 worth 485 million USD (issued by the World Bank) has been assured" (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 2023).

Coinciding with Mexico's commemoration of the Day of the Dead (November 2), official records acknowledged 48 deaths and 58 disappearances, numbers that are seriously questioned by the local population and most media outlets. Still, there is no official list with the names of

those lost in the storm, but funeral homes report at least 350 deaths only in Acapulco. On that same day, the federal government issued a Declaration of National Disaster in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (Official Gazette of the Federation) for 47 municipalities, among which Acapulco is the most known and populated. The declaration was meant to accelerate the funnelling of resources toward the affected region.

As days went by, the initial images of despairing mothers pleading for help to feed their children and disheartened shop owners demanding the presence of the state to restore order have made way for more optimistic narratives in mainstream media. A fortnight after the storm, images became more hopeful. Army, Navy, and Civil Guard personnel were featured clearing up the streets, and people appeared orderly queuing in front of Navy-managed water purification plants to fill up bottles and buckets. The Red Cross became visibly present, while foundations and private organizations packed and delivered humanitarian aid nationwide. Pharmacies reopened during the morning news broadcast, and banking institutions opened branches or sent mobile units focusing on cash withdrawals. From around those days, I remember footage of a woman selling tacos by the Costera Miguel Aleman (Acapulco's main avenue). As the camera opened its shot, we saw endless piles of debris flanking both sides of the street behind her. A reporter interviewed scavengers looking for aluminum and steel in the ruins, hoping to sell them to recyclers to buy food for their families as soon as possible. Buses full of passengers started circulating in the background as reporters acknowledged that Acapulco, visibly scared little by little, tried to keep calm and carry on. Then again, this was footage from the world-famous port of Acapulco. The cameras never reached municipalities like Apaxtla, Arcelia, Cuetzala del Progreso, Eduardo Neri, Florencio Villarreal, General Heliodoro Castillo, Juan R. Escudero, Leonardo Bravo, Mochitlán, San Marcos, Tecoanapa or Tlapehuala as well as Chilpancingo de

los Bravo, where the capital city of the state is located, that were also considered disaster zones. A month has passed, but the images haven't changed much. Today, a small hotel owner between the Costera and the beach celebrated that he and his team had managed to reopen for the holiday season, but he was saddened by the fact that the vacant lot next to his business was full of debris from the storm. As his hypothetical guests open their rooms' doors, their first impression of this former tropical paradise would be the foul stench of rotten organic matter and the sight of piles of broken furniture, glass, steel, and anything else you can imagine in a sea of debris waiting to be dealt with.

On November 9, while 125,000 K-12 children could still not return to classes due to the damages to their schools rendering them unsafe, the government declared the end of the emergency issued on November 2. Authorities can withdraw the declaration of emergency when three conditions need to coincide: a) the emergency (the storm itself) must have disappeared, b) the local authority must have regained its operational and financial capacity to deal with the aftermath of the emergency without federal support and c) that the local government has not requested the National Commission of Civil Protection (CNCP) to keep the declaration alive (Guillén, 2023). The crisis might be over, but the stressors that aggravated it persist. Acapulco and the affected neighbouring municipalities are far from being back on their feet, and the local government capacity is visibly overwhelmed with the dimension and complexity of the tragedy left behind. Sadly, I suspect the resources not spent between November 2 and 9 will have the same fate as those in 2021 and 2022; they will never reach Acapulco.

Coverage about Otis has slowly but surely left the front page of media outlets, and it will continue to diminish, fading in the background to fresher stories, until disappearing, like news about Grace, Agatha, Alex, Matthew and many other disasters, lost in oblivion. But that will not

mean that damages have been repaired, wounds healed, or problems solved. It will only mean that, out of the sun of public interest, the people of Guerrero will be left—as usual—to their own devices to climb out of the abyss previously dug in the shadows by years of corruption, violence, and poverty, which Otis threw them into even further. This is only the beginning.

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