

## Guatemala Food Security Alert

June 3, 2010

### Impacts of Tropical Storm Agatha threaten food security

On May 29, a low pressure system that was stationary off the coast of southern Guatemala became the first tropical storm of the East Pacific hurricane season. Tropical Storm Agatha produced high winds and torrential rains, though the storm weakened as it moved inland, dissipating by the morning of May 30. Nevertheless, the storm system produced up to 600 mm of rainfall over six days (May 25 to 30), particularly in the department of Suchitepéquez and along the border with El Salvador. Most of the country received significant amounts of rainfall, nearly 200 percent above the May average (Figure 1), causing flooding, landslides, and infrastructure damage. Preliminary government reports, which are changing daily, estimate that the storm has caused 156 deaths, affected more than 135,000 people, and displaced 76,000 people. There are concerns about the impact of the storm on food security in affected areas, given the potentially significant loss of the maize harvest expected to begin in August, as well as associated labor opportunities. Such losses would have the most impact on the western highlands, where the harvest is not expected until November.

The most affected departments are in the western, central, southern, and eastern parts of the country, and include Sololá, Izabal, Escuintla, Suchitepéquez, Quiché, Quetzaltenango, and Guatemala. However, damages are also reported in Santa Rosa, San Marcos, Totonicapán, Chimaltenango, Sacatepéquez, Zacapa, Retalhuleu, Alta and Baja Verapaz, and southern Huehuetenango. While rains were stronger in areas where the river watersheds in the west of the country and in Honduras originate, these rivers mainly end in the east of the country, which has therefore been more impacted by flooding. Rains in affected areas may cause losses of the *primera* maize crops, which were planted in April/May. This harvest typically ends the lean season in August/September in most parts of the country and in November/December in the highlands, where there is only one harvest.

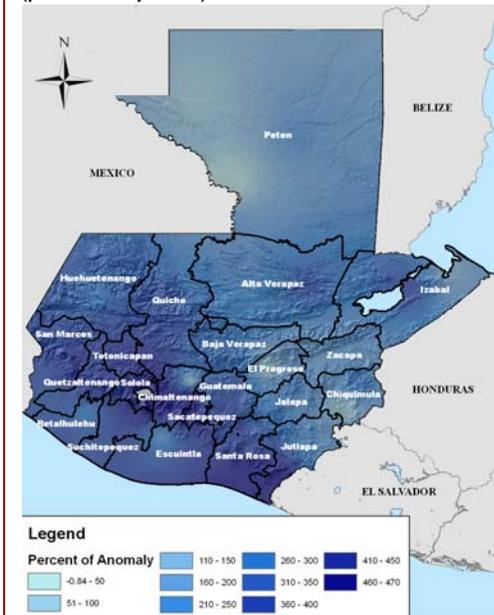
Given the extent of damage from the storm, nearly all livelihood zones were affected. Most of the poorest households within the affected zones are highly dependent on unskilled labor. While damage to cash crops such as coffee, sugar cane, and cardamom could increase labor opportunities for rehabilitation activities in the short term, this could also result in decreased income due to reduced labor opportunities around the cash crop harvest in October, because of a poorer harvest. In addition, severe damage to bridges and roads are likely to hinder physical access to food and markets. Reduced access to food in isolated areas will heighten immediate food insecurity for these households. In the coming months, therefore, expected losses in terms of crops and income will reduce options for household food security. The FEWS NET April Food Security Outlook through September 2010 anticipated high levels of food insecurity in the highlands due to crop losses last year and the lack of reserves, and damage caused by Tropical Storm Agatha is expected to worsen this situation.

The impacts of the storm have been compounded by the violent eruption of the Pacaya volcano on May 27, which expelled large quantities of volcanic sand/ash in the departments of Guatemala, Escuintla, and Sacatepéquez. Food security in this area might be affected by the loss of crops and small animals. Government institutions are in the process of search and rescue for missing persons, and have yet to evaluate the impacts of the volcano or the storm on agriculture.

International food and non-food aid will be needed to support infrastructure reconstruction, livelihoods, health, agriculture, and food security. In particular, seeds and other inputs are needed for re-sowing, particularly in the highlands, where the growing season is longer. A formal assessment to determine the extent of damage is required to focus emergency funds.

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**Figure 1.** Percent of rainfall anomalies, May (preliminary data)



Source: INSIVUMEH