

One Year After Hurricanes Eta & Iota: Remaining Impacts in Central America Nov. 2021

Background

Two back-to-back hurricanes hit Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua one year ago in November 2020. Hurricane Eta made landfall in Nicaragua as a category 4 hurricane on November 3rd, bringing with it rainfall and high winds that contributed to flooding and landslides in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. On Nov. 17th, Hurricane Iota, another category 4 hurricane, made landfall in Nicaragua and resulted in similar impacts to Hurricane Eta, hitting many of the same communities that had already faced Hurricane Eta. These twin hurricanes were [preceded](#) by tropical storms Amanda and Cristobal, which also caused destruction and flooding in El Salvador. The impacts of Hurricanes Eta and Iota were devastating—Oxfam reported that [11 million people](#) were affected throughout the region from the hurricanes. The back-to-back natural disasters are a part of the broader impacts of climate change on the Central America region.

A year later, communities across Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, are still reeling from the effects of these twin hurricanes, other ongoing conditions and have not yet fully recovered. Many of the communities impacted by the hurricanes continue to face water and sanitation challenges, poor housing and lack of access to food (see [Atlantic Council](#), [IFRC](#)). Several community members from the hardest-hit areas in these countries have migrated internationally or remain in need of humanitarian assistance. The upcoming hurricane and rain season this year alongside the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated already worsening situations of food insecurity, poverty, displacement, and livelihoods in communities affected by last year's hurricanes. Hurricane relief aid has either been insufficient or nonexistent, especially for marginalized groups such as indigenous, Afro-descendant, and poor campesino and urban communities. Systemic corruption and weak rule of law have aggravated the capacity of governments in the region to respond to the storms and the pandemic.

While Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation protections and benefits have been [extended for the citizens of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua](#) alongside other countries through the Ramos v. Nielsen and Bhattarai v. Nielsen lawsuits until December 2022, there have been no new TPS designations for the countries based on the impacts from Hurricanes Eta and Iota even though the conditions in these countries fit squarely within the criteria required for TPS designations under statute and even after the Guatemalan government made multiple requests ([Nov. 2020](#), [Sept. 2021](#)) for TPS for its citizens, another one of the criteria. An extension of TPS is necessary but ultimately a pathway to citizenship should be granted to TPS beneficiaries.

New TPS designations for Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua based on the impacts of Hurricanes Eta and Iota would be an important recognition by the Biden Administration of the conditions on the ground, help prevent further destabilization of the region, and allow TPS beneficiaries in the United States to send remittances to their families impacted by the storms, boosting the economies of these nations. According to the [Center for Migration and Economic Stabilization](#), citizens sent a total of \$24.5 billion in remittances to these four countries in the Central American region in 2020. **These TPS designations should be seen as a part of a broader administration strategy towards the northern countries of Central America.** To date, the U.S. government has provided close to \$300 million in hurricane relief aid to Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Yet humanitarian aid should be complemented with longer-term investments, implemented together with civil society organizations. Long-term investments in agriculture livelihoods, water and sanitation, and local capacity building will contribute to addressing the root causes of migration by stabilizing incomes, building resilient livelihoods, fostering safe and dignified living conditions, and building local capacity for communities to lead their development and respond to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Status Update of Conditions

The following is a brief update of the impacts of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua a year after they occurred.

Guatemala

Already enduring the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, Guatemalans were faced with even more hardships when the category 4 hurricane Eta made landfall in the country in November 2020. Eta alone brought torrential rains that caused deadly flooding and mudslides across Guatemala. After two weeks filled with deadly flooding, landslides, and attempts to address the widespread losses, the nation was hit once again by the category 4 hurricane Iota. As of January 12, 2021, over [1.9 million Guatemalans have been affected by Eta and Iota](#), including more than 1.2 million in need of humanitarian assistance, 60 people dead, 30 injured, 100 missing, and around 60,000 with damaged homes and local infrastructure. According to the Center for American Progress, Eta and Iota [severely damaged communities](#), many that are rural, indigenous, and remote, and [destroyed infrastructure](#) including roads, bridges, buildings, schools and health infrastructure. Several of these communities already suffered from recurrent flooding. Many small farmers were unable to reach coffee plantations to work because roads and bridges were left [unrepaired](#) for months. The storms caused extensive harm to the country's already limited means of transportation and communication. Oxfam estimates that nearly [71,000 homes, 500 roads, and 79 bridges](#) were damaged or destroyed. It is estimated that Guatemala lost more than [119,000 hectares of crops](#), affecting the livelihoods and food security of 267,000 families. A significant portion of the country's agricultural sector and foreign exports were obliterated. Following the storms, Guatemala's national disaster response coordination body requested international aid stating that the impacts [exceeded the government's capacity to respond](#).

As of Oct. 2021, rural communities in the dry and Altiplano corridor in Guatemala that were most impacted by the hurricanes saw an increase in already [severe food insecurity](#). Families in this area were forced to rebuild their own homes with makeshift materials because government aid never reached them after landslides and flooding from the hurricanes destroyed all their belongings. Many families that have migrated to the United States from these hard-hit areas point to the [lack of recovery after the hurricanes](#) as the catalyst that forced them to leave. The child malnutrition crisis has [worsened](#) this year due to the impact of the hurricanes and COVID-19, particularly for rural communities who have been unable to recover from the storms and had less resources to confront such shocks. There are still [455 schools](#) still recovering from the hurricanes as of November 2021 in Guatemala. According to one humanitarian organization, ongoing needs include food security and nutrition, agricultural livelihoods recovery and diversification, improved climate resilient farm practices, housing repair and improved sanitation, water supply systems and psychosocial support.

Guatemala also continues to see an intensifying situation with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. With [707 new infections](#) reported on average each day, the nation is facing an uptick in COVID-19 cases. The country has experienced a slow rate of vaccinations, with only about [26.9 percent of the population](#) estimated to have been fully vaccinated as of November 11th.

In addition, there has been significant weakening of the rule of law and the fight against corruption in Guatemala with the recent ousting of [the Constitutional Court's lead judge](#) and the country's lead [anti-corruption prosecutor](#), who was forced to flee the country, worsening the overall situation of human rights, corruption, and trust that citizens have in their institutions. Gang-related violence continues to plague the nation and threatens the lives of women, children, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Large-scale development projects including [mining projects](#), and the [repression](#) faced by communities as evidenced by the recent attacks and human rights violations against the indigenous community in El Estor, Izabal, demonstrates the lack of consultation with communities about development projects that

also fuel the displacement of people. So far this year, Guatemalan civil society organizations have [reported](#) that the total killings of LGBTQ+ people have reached at least 13. According to the nongovernmental organization Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (UDEFEHUGUA), there have been [5 assassinations and over 550 attacks](#) against human rights defenders in the first six months of 2021. If this trend continues this year, the numbers of attacks against human rights defenders will surpass 2020 figures. These cases are rarely investigated.

Honduras

Hurricanes Eta and Iota are estimated to have caused [\\$10 billion in damages](#) in Honduras, which was already facing economic decline due the coronavirus pandemic. About [4 million people](#) were estimated to be impacted in the country and one million were evacuated. The World Bank found that the cost in damages amount to nearly [40 percent of the country's gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#). It is estimated that Eta destroyed [318,000 hectares of](#) the nation's vital agricultural crops used for foreign trade as well as crops meant for subsistence farming, which serves as food supply for a significant portion of the population. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock reported losses of up to [80 percent in the agricultural sector](#). According to a report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), the impact of the hurricanes represented a loss of [45 billion lempiras](#) (approximately USD 1.86 billion) in these sectors. The hurricanes completely deteriorated the limited infrastructure across the nation, damaging and destroying roads, bridges, homes, and buildings. According to the Comisión Permanente de Contingencias (COPECO), more than [88,000 homes were affected, and about 927 roads and 134 bridges were lost to the storms](#). Before Eta and Iota made landfall, [1.65 million Hondurans were facing food insecurity](#) at crisis or worse levels of Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) calculated by the United Nations. The hurricanes left approximately [175,000 people displaced](#). As of the end of 2020, about [937,000 people were newly displaced](#) due to natural disasters in the country and over 3 million people are suffering food insecurity due the effects of COVID-19-restrictions and climate change. A recent study estimated that [60 percent](#) of the Honduran population does not have enough resources to feed themselves every day. Entire areas along the northern coast of Honduras, mostly home to [Afro-indigenous communities](#), were obliterated, putting these already vulnerable communities at [risk of more possible harm](#). As of the end of July 2021, it was estimated that nearly [2.8 million people](#), almost one-third of the country's population, were still in need of humanitarian assistance.

As of October 2021, the demands of some of the hardest hit communities in the northern Sula Valley region of Honduras for the repair of damaged embankments from the river, dams, dredging of rivers and reforestation of upper river basins following the hurricanes [had not yet been fulfilled](#), stymied by local government corruption, lack of transparency around public contracts, and shoddy construction work. Due to the failure of these repairs, recent rainfall caused the river to overflow its rebuilt banks and cut off two communities for a few days. In just one of the many communities impacted by the hurricanes along the northern coast, a community leader estimated that a year after the hurricanes [10 percent of the population](#) either migrated north or remained internally displaced due to Eta. The commissioner of COPECO has stated that more than a year later, assistance provided by the Honduran government has been [insufficient](#) and that there is a need for greater humanitarian aid. One family in one of these communities [states](#), "There has been some aid, yes. But a year later, we're still the same. They forgot about us." [Stories](#) abound of communities where the majority still live in makeshift housing over a year later. Humanitarian organizations report that families lack income to repair their homes and therefore continue to reside in unsafe conditions due to hurricane damage to their home.

According to Catholic Relief Services (CRS) assessments in some of the hardest hit areas of Honduras, including Cortes, Yoro, and Santa Barbara, families continue to report food as their most urgent need. In November 2020, 76 percent prioritized food, while in April 2021, 56 percent prioritized food. Overall,

many families continue to face food insecurity, with few options to recover livelihoods or generate income to cover basic needs. According to another CRS assessment, about 86 percent of farmers in April 2021 reported losing all their crops due to the storms. Access to safe water is also an ongoing issue, with many families lacking access due to damage from the hurricanes. They have limited resources to purchase water for drinking and personal use.

Along with its ongoing efforts to alleviate the damage caused by natural disasters, Honduras is currently experiencing its highest average number of coronavirus infections, now reporting [111 new cases on a daily basis](#). Only about [37.5 percent of the country's population](#) is fully vaccinated as of November 11th. The country's GDP is expected to have contracted by 9 percent in 2020 due to the pandemic and the [unprecedented impact](#) of the two hurricanes. With around 45 percent of households reported income losses in August, projections show that the number of people living under the [US\\$5.50 poverty line could only continue to increase](#), which would result in more than 700,000 people falling into poverty, all while inequality only continues to rise. Gangs, particularly MS-13 and Barrio 18, as well as organized crime and abusive official security forces contribute to the murder rate, which remains high even though it has declined slightly from astronomical levels in recent years. In 2020, Honduras had homicide rates of [37.6 per 100,000](#) residents, still the third highest in Latin America.

Systemic corruption and widespread human rights abuses that [drive](#) migration issues are unlikely to be resolved by upcoming presidential elections at the end of November 2021. A close and likely contested election could be followed by protests and repression as seen in 2017. In the last year, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández approved laws that weakened the ability of the justice system to prosecute money laundering and increased the likelihood of [prosecution](#) of those fighting against corruption and defending community rights. Dirty money penetrates the campaigns of presidential, legislative, and local politicians. Prosecutions of alleged drug traffickers, including President Hernández's brother in the Southern District Court of New York have [exposed](#) allegations that Hernández accepted drug trafficker's bribes in National Party campaigns, demonstrating the extent to which corruption and organized crime permeate the highest levels of the Honduran government. Repression by security forces in Honduras have also led to serious human rights violations and extrajudicial executions, many of which have [never been](#) investigated, including from the last presidential elections. The Honduran government relied heavily on the military and police to implement repressive and unequal lockdowns and detention measures, including arbitrarily assaulting and detaining citizens.

Large-scale development projects have also continued to [fuel displacement](#) of Afro-descendant and indigenous communities defending their lands. The Honduran justice system harshly prosecutes environmental and land rights leaders, jailing them for months or even years in pretrial detention. [14 nationally recognized land and environmental defenders](#) were killed last year, up from four in 2018, according to data made available by advocacy group Global Witness. Honduras has also been named as [one of the most dangerous countries to be a woman](#)—a woman is killed every [23 hours on average](#).

El Salvador

In the summer of 2020, El Salvador faced the destructive tropical storms Amanda and Cristobal, which caused [widespread deadly and destructive flooding and landslides](#) across its territories, [killing 30 and directly affecting more than 149,000](#) Salvadorans. The storms resulted in [substantial damage](#) to the country's already limited infrastructure, including the destruction of over 400 schools, and the economy's vital agricultural sector. According to the Center of American Progress, [Amanda and Cristobal](#) forced 12,600 people into temporary shelters, damaged or destroyed 2,800 hectares of crops, affected 22,000 farmers, and pushed 336,300 people into severe food insecurity. It is estimated that the tropical storms left an additional [363,000](#) people food insecure. Before the recovery process even started, the nation was again hit by twin hurricanes Eta and Iota nearly two weeks apart later in the year. El Salvador's Ministry

of Agriculture and Livestock as well as the Salvadoran Chamber of Small and Medium Agricultural Producers (CAMPO) estimated a [loss of \\$8 million](#) in its agricultural sectors after Eta alone and the destruction of an additional [42,000 hectares of crops](#) by the end of 2020. The combined impacts of the hurricanes and the tropical storms negatively affected the livelihoods of nearly 60 percent of households in El Salvador. Due to the pandemic and climate events, poverty in the already impoverished country has risen from [31 to 41 percent](#) as of December 2020. As of [August 2021](#), it is estimated that 490,000 people in El Salvador were experiencing food insecurity and 700,000 lacked access to safe drinking water according to the United Nations.

El Salvador has faced worsening political, social, and economic conditions over the course of the past year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID infections are currently increasing, with [224 new infections](#) being reported each day. As of November 11th, about [68.3 percent](#) of the country's population has been fully vaccinated. The pandemic inevitably negatively impacted economic growth, as El Salvador's [GDP contracted by nearly 8.7 percent in 2020](#) due to diminished economic activity, decreased trade, and a reduction in remittances sent from outside the country, mainly from the United States.

Since taking office, President Nayib Bukele has continued to undermine democratic checks and balances. Under his administration, [military and police arbitrarily detained people](#) and used excessive force to arrest people during the COVID lockdown. Bukele [publicly defied three rulings](#) by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court prohibiting arrests for violations of pandemic lockdowns. During their enforcement, the Ombudsperson's Office reported over [1,600 complaints of human rights violations](#), including over 620 of the right to freedom of movement. Actions by President Bukele and the legislature have severely undermined the independence of the judiciary, including through the dismissal of the Attorney General and the [magistrates](#) of the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, high levels of violence continue in the country. Although homicides have been reduced according to government estimates, [disappearances have increased](#) with as many as three people disappeared each day in El Salvador during the first four months of 2021, a marked increase over 2020. Violence against women continues to be a major issue. During the final weeks of March 2021, [50 percent more women](#) died in El Salvador from femicide than from COVID-19. Impunity is an issue for cases of violence against women, youth, and LGBTQ+ as cases rarely get investigated.

Nicaragua

The category 4 hurricanes Eta and Iota made their initial landfall on Nicaragua's coast in late 2020, both of which led to torrential flooding and landslides that [wiped out entire communities](#). The storms, which occurred two weeks apart, greatly impacted Nicaraguans across the nation, bringing even more devastation to the recovering population. The Nicaraguan government estimated that Eta and Iota caused [\\$743 million in damages](#), an estimate which amounts to about [6.2 percent of the country's gross domestic product](#). More than [150,000 houses were damaged or destroyed in the country](#), along with schools, health care facilities, and 98 percent of the road network. The storms destroyed or damaged [37,075 hectares of cultivated land](#), drowned [42,000 animal livestock](#), and an estimated [USD 19.6 million](#) is the total estimated value of damages and losses to the fisheries sector. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations finds that about [40 percent of those who were affected by the natural disasters are from Nicaragua](#)—an estimated 3 million people mainly from the indigenous territories of the North Caribbean Coast saw devastating effects. About [44 percent of indigenous territories](#) in the country were exposed to the storms (130,000 people). The artisanal fishing, forestry, and agriculture that served as the principal types of employment for these populations have been significantly impacted.

The combined effects of Hurricanes Eta and Iota and the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to exacerbate vulnerabilities, with increased levels of food insecurity and malnutrition as [30 percent of the working population relies on agriculture](#) for their livelihoods. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the

United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) warned that [acute food insecurity was likely to further deteriorate](#) in the outlook period from August to November 2021. Estimates suggest that [70 percent of the bean production of the later harvest and about 10 percent](#) of the rice were lost after the first hurricane. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, about [490,000 people have also been affected](#) by damage to drinking water supply systems and sanitation facilities. Another 300,000 people need food assistance and have suffered significant livelihood losses. The large number of houses damaged and/or destroyed has left more than [230,000 people vulnerable](#) to sexual and gender-based violence due to the lack of protections. As of October 2021, reports highlight that the country's most vulnerable communities have [yet to recover](#) from the damage wrought by Hurricanes Eta and Iota.

On top of trying to address the extensive damages caused by hurricanes Eta and Iota, Nicaragua has also faced inadequate COVID-19 response from its government. The country is entering into a very uncertain period after elections in early November. As of November 4th, only about [12.8 percent of the country's population](#) is fully vaccinated. [Doctors claim that Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, is hiding the pandemic's real toll](#). In the early months of the pandemic, the Nicaraguan government downplayed the virus, denouncing lockdowns and mask mandates, calling for citizens to continue regular routines. Ortega's administration not only dismissed the recommendations of world health authorities but publicly acted against safety precautions by [organizing large-scale public events](#). The government fired [at least 31 doctors from public hospitals](#) in apparent retaliation for participation in protests or expression of disagreement with management of the COVID-19 response. According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of Eta and Iota, as well as internal violence have contributed to a [2021 growth prediction of -2.5 percent](#). Previous to current events, the nation ranked as the [poorest country in Central America and the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere](#) in terms of nominal GDP per capita—standings that have truly intensified over the past year. Nicaraguans living with an income below \$3.2 per person per day is estimated to have increased from 13.5 percent in 2019 to 14.7 percent in 2020, pushing approximately [90,000](#) people into poverty. As of November 2021, there are an estimated [150 political prisoners](#). Many were detained under broad [accusations of treason](#) and working against government interests.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the ongoing situation of the pandemic, violence, poverty, and climate change are likely to worsen in the future of Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is one tool that the Biden Administration has to help the region recover from the lingering effects of Hurricanes Eta and Iota and more recent storms and environmental impacts. TPS would allow the citizens of these countries to continue living and working in the United States, to support their families in Central America still suffering from the impacts of the hurricanes, and to strengthen those countries' economies—creating positive impacts for communities in the United States and in Central America.