

Cuba Supporters in Canada Launch Hurricane Relief Fund

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, September 14, 2008

14 September 2008

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Introduction

by Robert Johnson

Cuba has been assaulted in quick succession by three powerful hurricanes. Gustav, Hanna, and Ike left a trail of massive destruction, the worst that Cuba has experienced in more than four decades. This was a cruel blow to the Cuban people, who have set an example to the world of selfless generosity despite their limited material resources. Under the leadership of their workers and farmers government, Cubans have now set to work to repair the damage.

Canada's government is providing no aid to Cuba in this time of crisis. The Canadian media, which has reported extensively on hurricane damage in Louisiana and Texas, has been all but silent on the devastation in Cuba.

In face of this inaction and silence, it is important for supporters of the Cuba revolution act effectively. The Canadian Network on Cuba has issued an appeal for funds to help them in their reconstruction effort; the initial goal is to raise \$100,000 as soon as possible. The CNC has issued a public appeal for funds, which we reproduce below.

The appeal is signed by Keith Ellis, an emeritus professor of the University of Toronto and an honorary member of the Union of Artist and Writers of Cuba. Dr. Ellis is the chair of the CNC's Cuba Hurricane Fund Committee.

The Canadian Network on Cuba <cnc@canadiannetworkoncuba.ca, www.canadiannetworkoncuba.ca> coordinates the work of organizations in solidarity with Cuba across the country: local groups, trade unions and political organizations. Its counterpart in Quebec is the Table de concertation de solidarité Québec-Cuba <info@tcsqc.ca, www.solidaritequebeccuba.qc.ca>.

The CNC's fund appeal was issued on September 2, before hurricane Ike compounded the devastation wrought by Gustav and Hanna. Although the winds of Ike were not as strong as those of Gustav, the later hurricane travelled across the entire island from east to west, drenching it with massive amounts of rain. In areas previously struck by Gustav, Ike toppled structures that had been weakened by its predecessor. Preparing for Ike, Cuba's civil defense system organized the evacuation of 2.5 million people, more than 20% of the population, from high-risk areas. Despite these efforts the storm caused the death of seven people.

A September 11 report by the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina updates some of the

information contained in the CNC's appeal, taking into account the effects of hurricanes Hanna and Ike. It says that the path of destruction stretches for more than a thousand kilometres across the island. In some areas of the country the scenes resemble those of an earthquake: sealed-off roads, houses demolished into scattered brick and dust, some flooded; electrical cables and towers toppled; plantations devastated.

At least 30,000 families have lost their homes; another 320,000 homes have suffered serious damage.

Agriculture has been severely affected. Preliminary reports indicate "colossal losses" in the production of bananas, corn (maize), sugar cane, coffee, yucca, guava, avocados and poultry. In the provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo 300,000 tins of coffee have been destroyed.

According to Prensa Latina, initial estimates by international agencies are that Cuba's losses could total more than three billion dollars. This imposes an enormous burden on the country's economy.

Socialist Voice urges its readers to distribute the following appeal as widely as possible and to contribute generously to the fund.

Canadian Network on Cuba
2 September, 2008

Dear Friends,

As you already know, Cuba has suffered the fierce attacks of a hurricane. This one, Gustav, is considered to be the most devastating in the last forty years. Having caused severe flooding in its early stages in eastern Cuba, it grew in strength and size in the warm Caribbean waters and, after demolishing the special municipality of the Isle of Youth with its awful force, invaded Pinar del Río, Cuba's most westerly province. By this time it had achieved a diameter of some 450 kilometers with the most destructive winds and rains packed into the eastern side of the monster. Although Pinar del Río bore the brunt of the damage, ravaged by sustained winds of 240 kph, with gusts as high as 350 kph, the area of damage extended to include the provinces of Havana, City of Havana and Matanzas.

The damage touched all sectors of the economic and social life of the region. In large parts of Pinar del Río and Isla de la Juventud, houses, schools, hospitals and other public buildings that weren't demolished, lost their roofs or suffered other kinds of damage. This means that warehouses that stored supplies and commodities such as rice, sugar, flour, tobacco, could not avoid exposing them to the elements. Cultural and recreational facilities were damaged or destroyed. Ferris wheels were turned into mangled metal, as were transmission towers used for electricity or communications. Damaged high-tension power lines, roads and bridges added to the toll. The agricultural sector has suffered severely. Hundreds of hectares of bananas fell early, as did citrus fruit. Sugar cane was massively affected, and sophisticated irrigation equipment was ruined. The part of the fishing industry based in the Isla de la Juventud was gravely hurt.

The good news is that - thanks to the precautionary measures, in which Cuba leads the world and which involved moving a quarter of a million people to safe shelter - not a single

life was lost. Five lobster fishermen who were missing at sea for a time were found after an intensive air and sea search. However, regrettably four were lost in accidents during Hurricane Ike.

Cuba, like other Caribbean countries and parts of the United States, occupies a geographical space that is in the path of hurricanes. This space is now more prone than ever to disastrous hurricanes as a result of climate change. Hardly has Gustav passed than Hanna and Ike appeared on the weather map like a caravan of doom. That Cuba should be a victim of this increased frequency is a striking injustice, since Cuba is the country least to be blamed for the deteriorating climatic conditions that fuel hurricanes. Let us remember that when the World Wildlife Fund in 2006 evaluated countries throughout the world to determine how they ranked with regard to sustainable development, based on economic and human development and protection of the environment, they found that Cuba was the only country that met the criteria.

Hurricanes will continue to batter Cuba. The island can frustrate them only to a certain extent, chiefly through deepening scientific knowledge of their behaviour and the achievement of a social organization based on solidarity, trust, egalitarianism and fairness. The day after Gustav passed, roads were being cleared and swept, food was being shipped to affected areas from provinces that were better supplied, linemen were arriving in Pinar del Río from Santiago to work “as long as is necessary,” and public health brigades were ensuring salutary conditions. Building materials were being distributed to those who needed repairs to their homes. The energy revolution has introduced technologies that have resulted in speeding up the restoration of electricity after damage to the grid. The presidents of the Defense Councils of Pinar del Río and Isla de la Juventud, both women, are being received in the various communities they visit, with cheerful demonstrations of confidence in them and in the Revolution. A badly damaged hospital in one of the communities in Pinar del Río was the place of birth of a boy during the hurricane. He was named Gustavo for the hurricane and David for the Cuban people’s spirit of fighting against great odds.

That fighting spirit must also be imbued with the patience of Sisyphus, because the unwanted meteorological phenomenon stubbornly recurs. A previous CNC donation went precisely to one of the again affected Pinar del Río communities to provide roofs for some 200 houses. We hope that these roofs have survived. The fighting spirit must also be buttressed by financial resources.

At this time of writing, two days after the disaster, the total cost of the damage has not yet been assessed, but it will surely be billions of dollars. Even though Cuba has not requested aid from us, the friends of Cuba, led by the constituent members of the Canadian Network on Cuba, will want, as they usually do, to do everything possible to help. In view of the great expense, we should imaginatively seek out new additional sources of funds-from different levels of government, farmer’s associations, trade unions, cultural groups-and in general widen the circle of the friends of Cuba. We should work to include people who are indignant at injustice, those who understand, for example, that one of the main reasons why the Bush administration let some of its citizens die rather than accept Cuban medical help at the time of Katrina was because they wanted no easing of their brutal embargo, even when Cuba was faced with terrible natural disasters. Let us approach Canadians with some of the information included in this piece and, as José Martí would do, believing in their goodness.

The need for funds to recover from hurricanes Gustav and Ike is urgent. We aim to forward

to Cuba an initial contribution of \$100,000 as soon as possible. We hope that in this hour of Cuba's need, you will find it possible to respond in a spirit that reflects our respect and appreciation of the generosity and determination of the Cuban people.

One hundred per cent of your donation will go to Cuba either directly or in shipping requested materials to help in the reconstruction. There are two ways to send in donations. The charitable organization "Mackenzie-Papineau Memorial Fund", registered Canadian charitable organization # 88876 9197, is working with us to collect donations for Cuba Hurricane Relief. Either way, you will receive a charitable tax receipt:

1) Send your cheque made payable to the "Mackenzie-Papineau Memorial Fund", clearly stating "For Cuba Hurricane Relief" on the memo line, together with your name, address and telephone number if it is not already on your cheque so a tax receipt can be issued and sent to you (or state that a tax receipt is not needed).

Envelopes should be addressed to:

Mackenzie-Papineau Memorial Fund,
Att: S. Skup, Treasurer
56 Riverwood Terrace,
Bolton, Ontario, L7E 1S4

If you do not want a tax receipt, you can go directly to any TD Canada Trust branch and deposit money in the following bank account: Institution #004 Transit #03212 Branch #321, Acct.#: 500 1074 Mackenzie-Papineau Memorial Fund.

2) Make out your cheque to your local Cuba solidarity committee. Include your name, address and phone number, clearly stating "For Cuba Hurricane Relief". The local committee will send one cheque together with a list of the names, addresses, phone numbers and the amount of the donation of the individual donors to the Mackenzie-Papineau Memorial Fund (Registered charitable organization # 88876 9197). Tax receipts will then be sent to individual donors.

3) If you wish, you can go directly to the Oxfam Canada website, <http://www.oxfam.ca/>. Click on Hurricane Relief and send in a donation specifying, if you wish, in the comment section that the donation go to Cuba. You will automatically and immediately receive a tax deductible receipt.

Yours in solidarity,

Keith Ellis,
Chair, Cuba Hurricane Fund Committee,
Canadian Network on Cuba

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