



Wilma: testament to Mexican unity and prevention culture

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The response to Hurricane Wilma by the people of Quintana Roo serves as a lesson in how to face these natural phenomena

The coasts of the Caribbean Sea have been devastated by hurricanes since time immemorial; the Yucatán Peninsula is probably the place in Mexico most vulnerable to cyclones.

Throughout the centuries, thousands of people have had their lives or their possessions affected by these meteorological events. In the last 20 years alone, this region of the Mexican southeast was hit in 1988 by Hurricane “Gilbert”, maybe one of the most severe hurricanes that has crossed the region; in 1990 it was “Diana”; “Opal” and “Roxanne” in 1995; “Gordon” in 2000, “Claudette” in 2003, and in 2005 “Emily”, “Stan” and “Wilma”.

Recently, the Yucatán Peninsula and several states of the country were affected by Hurricane “Dean” in 2007.

Each experience and the passage of time has strengthened the culture of prevention by using early warning systems, as well as establishing means of coordination between the federal, state and municipal authorities with the citizenry and private initiatives. But without a doubt, it was Wilma’s passage that marked Quintana Roo as a society, that gave a sense of belonging to its inhabitants and which today serves as a lesson in how to face these natural phenomena.

The preceding statements could not be understood in all of their dimensions without mentioning that Cancún and the Maya Riviera are some of the most important tourist destinations in Mexico. Some 10 million tourists come to the area every year, a number that represents half the total number of tourists that visit our country annually. Quintana Roo generates an annual income of US\$4 billion in tourism; this economic activity is its natural vocation.

More than 50 per cent of the hotel and infrastructure of the state exists here; Cancún alone has some 28,000 rooms and in 2006 it welcomed 6.5 million visitors. The area is home to more than three quarters of the population of Quintana Roo, which represents some 600,000 inhabitants.

The employment opportunities created by tourism have prompted a strong migration to this region, which 30 years ago was no more than a virgin area but today is an economic power thanks to tourism.

Wilma: a devastating hurricane

On October 15, 2005, tropical depression number 24 formed over the Atlantic Ocean, two days later it received the name of Wilma and the National Meteorological Service (Servicio Meteorológico Nacional - SMN) announced an alert for the Yucatán Peninsula.

The manner in which Wilma evolved to transform itself into a category 5 hurricane in only 24 hours, surprised the experts and all those who closely follow natural phenomena that threaten tourist destinations.

From that moment onwards, all Federal Government alert systems were put into action and the then President of Mexico announced immediate action to face the hurricane. The priority in a situation of this nature is, above all else, to safeguard the lives of the people who are in the danger zone.

In our case, as the Ministry of Tourism, our first challenge was the evacuation of the 40,000 tourists who were in the area. The rescue operation counted on the support of various airlines as well as various government agencies. Hotel owners, airlines and government authorities all took part in this effort; we all worked hand in hand with the purpose of safeguarding our tourists, our people.

While some tourists returned to their places of origin, others were relocated to Mexico City as well as to other locations. Some 23,000 foreign tourists were transported to Mérida, Yucatán, whose airport registered an unprecedented increase in its activities.

With the extraordinary organisation efforts of the Federal Mexican Government, 26 municipalities were given aid and declared a state of emergency and the 5th Naval Region prepared the “Plan Marina” with 2,000 individuals and more than 100 vehicles; more than



70,000 people had to vacate the coastal municipalities of Quintana Roo and Yucatán, and some 20,000 people, including inhabitants and tourists were taken to temporary shelter.

There are hundreds of anecdotes from these shelters, stemming from the diverse activities undertaken by hotel owners to safeguard and even entertain their guests, to those of tourists who stayed in the same lodging with the rest of the population.

At noon on October 21st Wilma made landfall in Cozumel, when the Hurricane had maximum sustained winds of up to 220km/h and gusts of up to 270km/h while it passed through Quintana Roo. Wilma's speed was reduced due to its encounter with colder winds coming from the north.

The hurricane moved at a speed of only 5km/h, therefore, some areas experienced high winds for more than 60 hours; at 7pm on October 22nd the hurricane returned to open waters.

Wilma has been the most devastating hurricane in Quintana Roo by far and that is because the continuous rains and more than 60 hours of sustained strong winds are equivalent to five average hurricanes one after the other. The amount of rainfall during the hurricane was equivalent to the amount of precipitation in one and a half years in the area. Some 850,000 inhabitants of Cancún and the Maya Riviera were affected in one way or another. All hotels in the area were damaged, as well as the majority of homes, businesses and public buildings, schools, hospitals, airports, and also fishing and docking facilities.

At the same time, other infrastructure such as roads, lighting, radio and telecommunications towers, road signs, billboards, and urban equipment were all damaged by Wilma. Similarly, the beaches – the sustenance of tourism – had disappeared.

Due to the lack of electricity, the potable water system as well as the drainage system of residual waters was at the edge of collapse.

Electrical plants ran out of energy, there were floods in several areas of Cancún, 76 localities of the most populated area of Quintana Roo were affected, the damages and aftermath of the phenomenon surpassed 30 billion pesos, three people died in Quintana Roo, while there was only one fatal accident in Yucatán.

On the other hand, a Civil Protection operation was implemented by the Ministry of Public Security of the state, the Preventive Federal Police, the Army

and the Navy, as well as municipal police, in order to avoid looting.

The reconstruction effort

On Sunday October 23rd, the President of Mexico and an important delegation of high-ranking federal officials arrived in Quintana Roo, so that we were able to evaluate first hand the situation and also coordinate the necessary support action.

That same day I was named Director of Coordination for the Reconstruction Activities of Cancún by the President of Mexico, who also wired instructions for the channelling of US\$10 million in order to promote the destination, and the federal government as a whole spent US\$250 million on the reconstruction of the area.

On Monday October 24th, the President agreed to the establishment of working groups for the resumption of economic activities in the area. The day after the hurricane passed, President Fox announced that the measures would be adopted by the federal government in order to help the local population.

On Tuesday October 25th, the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) sent 105 mobile electrical plant generators in order to begin re-establishing the service to the affected area. That same day, the airports in Cancún were re-opened, while the maritime communication with Cozumel and Isla Mujeres was renewed.

What surprised the experts most was the manner in which Wilma evolved into a category five hurricane in only 24 hours

Hurricane Wilma forced the evacuation of some 40,000 tourists from Cancún and the Yucatán peninsula





It was very encouraging to welcome the first charter group of tourists from the Netherlands the Friday following Wilma's landfall

The Maya Riviera includes some of the most important tourist destinations in Mexico, attracting some 10 million tourists a year

The airport was severely damaged a few hours after the start of the hurricane; in the Cancún airport only military relief planes were landing and taking off.

On Thursday October 27th, the president announced a package of fiscal support in order to accelerate reconstruction works in the tourist areas; two days later he announced the start of a programme specially targeted at micro, medium and large enterprises.

By Friday November 4th, Cancún had more than 3,000 hotel rooms available to receive the first tourists arriving to the area after Wilma.

It was very encouraging to welcome the first charter group of tourists from the Netherlands the Friday following Wilma's landfall; the supportive help of the Mexicans was already being distributed.

A little over two weeks later, the Department of Social Development had distributed more than 225,000 despensas (food relief packages), these were distributed with the effort and support of civil society and the commitment of the authorities. Electrical services were normalised on Tuesday November 8th, and the potable running water service was fully restored on Monday November 14th.

A destination renewed

Despite the hard work there was something that had disappeared forever, the white sandy beaches of

Cancún which had been affected since Gilberto's time, had now disappeared.

It was necessary to recover the strip of sand responsible for its international fame; to that end, the government created the trusteeship for the recovery and maintenance of the beaches of Cancún.

The project was coordinated by the Secretary of Tourism using as its starting point a study prepared by the Mexican engineers of the CFE who supervised its technical component.

The project entailed placing 2.7 million cubic metres of sand. The restoration of the sand and the creation of a new beach were done in record time, a unique effort to give back to Cancún its main attraction, the tourism industry would benefit greatly thanks to the new beaches.

Cancún would once again be the principal tourist attraction of Mexico, now with a renewed image. The beaches of Cancún, the principal attraction of the area, were recovered and improved after their virtual disappearance, but the area's most important element, its inhabitants, have found a new form of cohesion, a new way of seeing themselves and their community.

Wilma's passage showed them that tragedies can bring out the best in people, the best in a government, the best in a society. After one of the worst climatic misfortunes and thanks to the support of the federal government through the Department of Tourism, Cancún is fully renovated; Cancún and the Maya Riviera remain the most beautiful beach destinations in the world.

Wilma's legacy: a culture of prevention and social unity in Quintana Roo

It has been two years since Hurricane Wilma's passing and I think it is opportune to give recognition to the people and the government of Quintana Roo, as well as to the local and national businessmen for their extraordinary participation in the prevention and reconstruction works of the affected municipalities after this meteorological event.

The impact that this meteorological phenomenon had in the Mexican Caribbean, and the recovery efforts undertaken by the three levels of the government, the population and the industrial sector do not go unacknowledged.

It is very important to recognise the culture of prevention that has emerged in our country. The early warnings have allowed for the early evacuation of the people who live in the danger zones as well as that of





the tourists who visit our destinations. At the same time, they allow governments to have enough time to protect critical infrastructure such as energy supply plants, and water reserves, which could lead to additional catastrophes if opportune measures are not taken.

The population has learnt to protect itself from hurricanes, and although there are still communities where it is difficult to evacuate those affected due to their fear of looting, the prevention culture has taught us that only by coordinating efforts with all sectors can we face these natural catastrophes.

Today, with great satisfaction, we tell the world and Mexico that the Mexican Caribbean, especially Cancún and Cozumel, are not only standing but also fully renovated and ready to continue welcoming hundreds of thousands of foreign and national tourists, who have transformed these extraordinary beaches into a global icon.

It is necessary to recognise that the reconstruction and investment works carried out by the federal government in the affected destinations rely on the full support of the civil population through aid programmes, and particularly, those financing the rehabilitation and construction of homes.

The participation of the population, the business sector and that of the leaders of the three levels of government during the reconstruction, are a testimony of the unity and greatness of the Mexican people, who in the face of adversity wanted and knew how to emerge victorious.

Recognition

The experience of the reconstruction works brought forward the recognition of the Federal government as well as that of Quintana Roo for their work in protecting and securing the lives of tourists and the local population after Hurricane Wilma.

Through their respective embassies, Great Britain, Spain, Ireland, France, The Netherlands, Hungary, Japan, Australia and Brazil, expressed their thanks for the quick evacuation of the visitors of those nationalities who were vacationing in the districts of Quintana Roo and Yucatán, in spite of the complex conditions in the area at the time.

These congratulations can be added to the recognition expressed by the Secretary General of Tourism of Spain, Ramón Martínez Fraile, to the Mexican Government for its response capacity in facing the devastation of Hurricane Wilma. In the framework of the XVI General Assembly of the World Tourism

Organisation, held in Dakar, Senegal, the Spanish official stated that Mexico is an example to follow for the 150 member countries of that organisation.

Similarly, the then President Vicente Fox Quesada received from the Secretary General of the World Tourism Organisation, Francesco Frangialli, the resolution which was passed by the General Assembly for “Response in the event of a natural catastrophe” by the Government of the Republic, as a result of the passage of Hurricane Wilma in October of 2005.

This recognition was given to Mexico due to its works in prevention, civil protection, support to the civil population and the evacuation of tourists, amongst others, and as an example to be followed in future situations.

For its part, the Chamber of Commerce of Mexico and the United States publicly recognised the work of the Ministry of Tourism, for its timely coordination and response in the rehabilitation of the tourist destinations of Quintana Roo, after Hurricane Wilma. The President and Director General of the Northern American Organisation, Albert Zapanta, highlighted the actions undertaken by the federal dependency which acted correctly, first to safeguard the integrity of the tourists and the population, and subsequently in the process of reconstruction of Cancún, Cozumel and Isla Mujeres.

The area's most important element, its inhabitants, have found a new form of cohesion, a new way of seeing themselves and their community

2.7 million cubic metres of sand were needed to restore the beaches of Cancún to their former glory

