

Bare forests left Haiti exposed

BY SUSANNAH A. NESMITH

DIBEDOU, Haiti - The Sot is usually a gurgling little creek, just a few inches deep, that doesn't even provide enough water for the dozen families living near it. They walk 30 minutes to the Branle River to get water and wash their clothes.

But a week ago, the Sot rose 30 feet, one of countless creeks, streams and rivers suddenly swollen by the rains that Tropical Storm Jeanne dumped around this and other mountain villages in northwestern Haiti.

It filled the ravine it runs through, washed over a road nearby and met the Branle in a corn field. Together, they flooded a half-mile-wide swath, sweeping people, houses, crops and farm animals in front of them in a furious race to the Caribbean port city of Gonaives.

STRUCK BY TRAGEDY

There, in a city of some 200,000 surrounded on three sides by mountains and the rivers and streams that flow from them, it killed several hundred people. Altogether, Jeanne's floods and mudslides killed nearly 1,200 Haitians and left as many missing.

But the catastrophe began high in those mountains, long deforested as trees were cut to make charcoal, the cheapest cooking fuel in the hemisphere's poorest nation.

Without tree roots, the soil is loose. And when it rains, there's little to soak up the water, so it runs downhill, triggering mudslides and floods that roll toward the sea with killer fury.

The floods devastated a string of villages, cut four-foot -deep gullies across the road from Dibedou to Gonaives, covered pastures deep under mud, washed out bridges and tipped over trucks and buses.

They changed the landscape, and took human lives.

MANY DEVASTATED

The Sot and the Branle weren't the only ones to flood.

The rain filled the Bassin, La Grande and Bayonnaise rivers and they surged together into the La Quinte River, which empties into the Caribbean 1 ½ miles south of Gonaives.

Smaller rivers like the Bout Bambou, the Marseille and the Pendue also flooded.

Dibedou, a clutch of a dozen houses by a dirt road, was relatively fortunate. Only a handful died. But some of the houses built on low-lying areas were washed away, and most of their families lost their farm animals and their crops.

The floodwaters receded here almost as quickly as they came. But now the land itself is wounded: Fields once planted with corn and sorghum are covered with boulders; a thick, now-dry layer of mud covering other fields will take months to plow and replant.

"We lost eight cows and eight goats," said Asemene Donasien, pointing to a shed where her family's corn harvest was stored. Soaked by the floods, the corn is now ruined for eating or as seed for planting.

That may seem like a small tragedy, but it is catastrophic for a farmer in a country so acutely poor that ownership of any farm animals or the loss of a single crop can mean the difference between survival and starvation.

It was that poverty that took the trees, and continues to take them.

IN CRISIS

Though the deforestation began more than 200 years ago, as French colonists felled forests to export mahogany and other hardwoods, the problem has reached crisis proportions in recent generations.

"It is very urgent to reforest, but it would require a lot of will from every part -- from the government and from the people," said government geographer Jean Saint-Ville. ``But there is the weight of poverty. The people cut the trees because they have nothing."

Marylene Deris, pregnant and with a 4-year-old son at home, says chopping down trees for charcoal is the only way she can feed her family.

She walks eight days into the mountains to find the trees. By the time the charcoal arrives in Gonaives, a sack the size of two bed pillows brings in less than \$8.

"I know this is why Gonaives flooded, everyone keeps saying that," she said, aggravated by a question. ``Find me other work. And another way to cook."

Those are monumental missions.

Even well-to-do Haitians who have access to electric and gas burners still prefer to use charcoal for cooking, largely because their maids believe that traditional Haitian dishes taste better when cooked with charcoal.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Alix Baptiste, secretary of state for Haitians Living Abroad and member of a national emergency commission created after the Gonaives catastrophe, said the government is trying to address the problem.

"We are looking at substitutes, such as burners and alternate sources of energy so people don't cut down trees," he said.

The government also will look to enforce the myriad laws already on the books to prevent ecological disasters like the Gonaives floods. There are laws requiring people to plant two trees for every one they fell, and banning the construction of homes in flood-prone areas.

"All those laws now have to be enforced," Baptiste said. ``But we also have to look at the economic impact on those who depend on those [trees] and we have to encourage them to go in a different direction."

But until a massive reforestation effort is undertaken, Haiti will continue to wash into the sea, bit by bit most days and in great mudslides and floods occasionally. In May, rains sparked mudslides in the south that killed 1,700.

DEATHS MOUNT

Before-and-after satellite pictures of Gonaives show a hill on the southern outskirts "stripped of vegetation, which

caused a huge mudslide," according to the Denver-based company Space Imaging. The mudslide appears to have penetrated several blocks into the city.

Jacques Munro, a New York banker visiting his father, buried five unidentified bodies he found on his father's farm in Passe-Reine, in the mountains above Gonaives, after the floodwaters receded.

"We called around, 'Is this yours? Is this yours?' but no one knew who they were," Munro said, wiping the sweat from his brow as he tried to clean the mud out of a generator so that he could start up a water pump and get fresh water to the village.

His father sat in the shade and worried about Haiti's future.

"The people are poor, the government does nothing, there is corruption," said Wilhem Munro. "It's like the flood. It started small up in the mountains, and now, look what has happened here."

Herald staff writers Jacqueline Charles, Trenton Daniel and David Ovalle contributed to this report.