

This week in history: October 23-29

22 October 2023

25 years ago: Deadliest hurricane of the century makes landfall in Central America

On October 29, 1998, Hurricane Mitch made landfall in Central America and became the second-deadliest hurricane on record, second only to the Great Hurricane of 1780. No final death toll was ever established internationally due to the extent of the damage it caused, but over 11,300 people died and a further 9,191 were missing.

The hurricane spanned six days of severe winds, torrential rains, flooding and mudslides in Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama and southern Mexico. At its peak the hurricane was the fourth-strongest Caribbean hurricane of the century, with 180mph (305kph) winds.

The worst fatalities were in Honduras, approximately 7,000 deaths, and Nicaragua, around 3,800 deaths. Mitch destroyed an estimated 60 percent of Honduran infrastructure and left more than 300,000 people homeless. In the capital city of Tegucigalpa, 20,000 lost their homes as the raging waters of the Choluteca River swept through entire neighborhoods, washing away cars, trucks, trees, power lines and livestock.

“The capital has been leveled,” Mayor Cesar Castellanos told news outlets. He was later killed in a helicopter crash while surveying the damage. “Blocks and blocks of middle class and poor neighborhoods, shops—they have all been completely demolished.”

Officials were greatly concerned over social unrest. Police arrested 250 people for looting wrecked supermarkets and stores in the capital city. They were also mobilized to suppress a bloody riot at a Tegucigalpa jail housing 3,500, including 2,500 inmates transferred from another jail after it became flooded.

“This is the worst disaster to befall Honduras in a hundred years,” said Vice President William Handal Raudales. “This has been a harder blow to us than all the 100 military coups we’ve suffered in our history put together, harder than all the 36 civil wars we’ve gone through put together.” Handal was particularly concerned about damage to export industries in the free trade zones. “Hurricane Fifi [which killed 3,000 Hondurans in 1974] was nothing compared to this. It took 12 to 14 years effort to overcome Fifi. This one will take 30 or 40 years.”

The president of Honduras, Carlos Roberto Flores, told CNN’s Spanish-language network the flooding was so extensive that 70 percent of the upcoming harvests had been lost. In Washington, President Bill Clinton said the US government would only providing \$2 million in food, medicine, water and other emergency relief supplies. The amount was particularly outrageous

considering that over previous decades the US had provided billions to prop up the region’s military regimes and native elite and protect American business interests.

For further reading:

At least 7,000 killed by Central American hurricane

Anger mounts over relief delays from Hurricane Mitch

US President Richard Nixon vetoes War Powers bill

On October 24, 1973, US President Richard Nixon vetoed the War Powers Act that was passed by both houses of Congress. The bill placed restrictions on the ability of the President to deploy military forces without a vote in Congress.

In a statement explaining his veto Nixon claimed the bill, “would seriously undermine this nation’s ability to act decisively and convincingly in times of international crisis.” He added that he believed the bill to be “unconstitutional and dangerous” and that it would “take away... authorities which the President has properly exercised under the Constitution for almost 200 years.”

The War Powers bill required that the President report to Congress 48 hours after the deployment of US armed forces in a foreign country. After that, the forces must be withdrawn within 60 days unless Congress voted to approve the military action.

The bill had passed through both houses of Congress with a significant majority, with the vote in the Senate 75-20 and in the House of Representatives 238-122. This was well over the two-thirds vote in the Senate needed to override a presidential veto and just three votes shy of a two-thirds margin in the House. With 74 House absentees it was likely that the veto would be overridden, and the law passed. The veto override was carried out November 7.

The bill was prompted by the massive antiwar movement in the United States that saw millions protest against US intervention in Vietnam. In the aftermath of the war the Democratic-controlled Congress proposed the law to give an appearance of reining in the unrestricted military powers of the US president.

Despite its eventual passage, the War Powers Act has never prevented the American government from imperialist intervention in the form of plotting coups and waging endless wars overseas. The law has ultimately been ignored by US presidents and Congress has never forced the withdrawal of forces due to a violation of the act.

Despite its hollow nature, Nixon vetoed the bill in an attempt to

stop any restrictions of the president to wage war against the interests of the population. At the same time the bill was brought to Nixon's desk, the White House was drawing up plans for the United States to deploy troops to the Middle East to back Israel's war against Egypt and Syria and break up the Arab oil embargo.

While the Nixon administration provided an unprecedented amount of arms to Israel during the Yom Kippur War it stopped short of directly deploying Americans in combat. But this had little to do with the new War Powers Act and everything to do with concerns over rekindling the antiwar movement that had waned since the US withdrawal from Vietnam.

75 years ago: Israeli army massacres Palestinians at Al-Dawayima

On October 29, 1948, the Israeli army perpetrated a notorious massacre in the village of Al-Dawayima. The total death toll has never been fully established, with estimates ranging from 80 to several hundred, but it is known that dozens of women and children were murdered.

The mass killing occurred amid the ongoing ethnic cleansing that preceded and followed the May 1948 establishment of Israel as an imperialist-backed state, based on Jewish identity. The Al-Dawayima massacre took place under conditions of an Arab-Israeli war, with a coalition of Middle Eastern nations taking up arms against the newly formed Zionist state.

The head of the village, Hassan Mahmoud Ihdeib, who survived the attack, later stated that it began in the middle of the day. He claimed that 20 armored cars of the Israeli military had suddenly approached Al-Dawayima, with smaller contingents simultaneously descending on it from at least two other directions.

Ihdeib reported that no warning or call to surrender was given. The Israeli troops began firing indiscriminately with machineguns and other arms. Because the firing came from multiple directions, in an arc-like formation, prospects of escape were limited, and many were mown down. Ihdeib stated that a group of villagers had gone into the mosque to seek refuge from that barrage. When the Israeli forces left, he claimed that 60 dead bodies were found there, the majority of the victims old and infirm.

Based on a census, it appeared that as many as 455 villagers were unaccounted for.

The killing occurred amid Operation Yoav, an attempt by the Israeli army to inflict a defeat on Egyptian forces and secure control of the Negev Desert. The army's 89th Commando Battalion, which carried out the attack, was made up of various right-wing Zionist militias including Irgun, a terroristic organization that also engaged in bombings of civilian buildings and hostage-taking.

On October 24, 1923, the communist-led insurrection in Hamburg, the main port city of Germany, was suppressed by government forces after the revolutionary forces stood down.

The day before, armed workers had seized at least 17 police stations in the city and another seven in the surrounding area, from which they armed themselves. Detachments of workers had set up barricades throughout the city. An estimated 5,000 workers participated in the insurrection. The city was papered with posters that read, "Long live Soviet Germany! Long live the Federation of Soviet states of the world! Long live the world revolution!"

The insurrection in Hamburg had gone ahead even though a national insurrection had been halted by the leadership of the German Communist Party on October 22, when it allowed the left Social Democrats to cancel plans for a general strike. Couriers had been sent to all areas calling off the action, but the news did not reach Hamburg until October 24. The failure to seize power in Germany was to have repercussions for the whole international working class for decades to come.

The Soviet writer Larissa Reissner describes the end of the insurrection in Hamburg:

"That Wednesday, the 24th, having received no news of the start of the German revolution the leading group was compelled to sound the retreat, not because the workers had been smashed but what was the point in pursuing the struggle in Hamburg alone, of flaring up in isolation against a back cloth of general collapse!?"

"It was not quite so easy to order the retreat in a city drunk with victory, where the defense is ready at any moment to go over to the offensive and hundreds of barricades and tens of thousands of workers are preparing for an all-out assault and the terrible closing act of civil war—the triumphant seizure of power. The first courier who brought news of the retreat was knocked off his feet with a furious punch ...

"All right, they retreated. Disappointed and grumbling, parting for the last time yet having repulsed the enemy from their barricades for many hours. Taking advantage of the confusion the riflemen abandoned the earthworks, barricades and sentry posts without a sound. They went off with their weapons, taking with them the dead and wounded, covering up all traces left behind them, and gradually scattered out to the now silent suburbs. This planned retreat was carried out under the cover of marksmen dispersed on the roof."

The next day, the police mounted an offensive. Over 1,400 people were arrested. Of these, 443 were tried in special courts and received sentences ranging from a few months to the death penalty.



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100 years ago: Hamburg uprising suppressed in Germany