

Hundreds dead in massive earthquake in Peru

David Walsh
18 August 2007

A massive earthquake struck Peru Wednesday, resulting in hundreds of deaths and homelessness for tens of thousands. The principal victims were the poor in a region on Peru's Pacific coast south of the capital, Lima, including the cities of Pisco, Chincha and Ica.

Thousands of houses made of sun-dried mud bricks collapsed in the tremor, which the US Geological Survey measured at 8.0 on the Richter scale. At least 15 aftershocks, some as strong as 6.3, followed the initial quake, which occurred at 6:30 p.m. local time.

Hundreds of people were gathered in Pisco's San Clemente cathedral for a mass marking the Feast of the Assumption when the building's ceiling began to break apart. The tremors lasted for more than two minutes. The cathedral's subsequent collapse left 200 worshippers buried in the rubble. Rescuers dug out bodies on Thursday and lined them up on the plaza.

Photographs in the Peruvian media reveal frightful scenes of corpses lying in the street, coffins and body bags in tents or on sidewalks, hospital wards full of the injured, fearful families sleeping in the open, residents amid the bricks and dust of their former homes, "refugees" from the area streaming down roadways, rescue teams working under floodlights, crushed cars, fallen power lines, highways with giant cracks, and scenes of general destruction and chaos.

Much of southern Peru is without electricity, water and telephone service.

The UN has estimated that the earthquake killed at least 510 people and injured more than 1,500. The toll of dead and injured is expected to rise. A representative of Lutheran World Relief commented, "We're worried about people in rural valleys inland from the quake's epicenter, as communications have been cut off and we haven't been able to get reliable information from those areas." UN Assistant Secretary-General Margareta Wahlstrom told a reporter: "It is quite likely that the numbers will continue to go up since the destruction of the houses in this area is quite total."

The director of Peru's Civil Defense Institute, Aristides

Mussio, told reporters that more than 16,000 homes had been destroyed. Peru's President Alan Garcia asserted that some 80,000 had been left without shelter by the earthquake, one of Peru's most severe in a century. The mayor of Pisco, Juan Mendoza, told the Peruvian media, "Our city is destroyed." He estimated that 70 percent of the city's structures had been leveled. Mendoza said, "We don't have lights, water, communications. Most houses have fallen. Churches, stores, hotels—everything is destroyed."

Luis García, a reporter from *El Comercio*, one of Peru's leading newspapers, told the *New York Times* from Pisco: "There are corpses all over the place. The bodies are thrown everywhere and every family is mourning over the loss of a loved one, friend, neighbor or family member." He added: "The people need help to remove the rubble. They need tents, water and food, because there is nothing; everything is blocked off, destroyed."

A considerable portion of the buildings in the city of Ica are believed to have been destroyed as well. According to a CNN report, residents there told journalists that they had received no assistance or even visits from government or aid officials.

Officials of the Garcia government are calling for "calm" and have mobilized 100,000 police to back up this appeal. Already, however, desperate crowds, without food or water for 36 hours, ransacked a public market in Pisco, while others looted a refrigerated truck carrying supplies and blocked the Pan-American Highway. One man reportedly died during an attempt to rob an aid truck.

Announcing that the government was doubling police patrols to prevent looting of aid-delivery trucks and food markets, Prime Minister Jorge del Castillo declared, "We call on people to remain calm so not to complicate our task. The magnitude of this catastrophe is huge."

Following complaints that supplies were not reaching the affected areas rapidly enough, President Garcia declared, "Nobody is going to die of hunger or thirst." He went on, "I understand your desperation, your anxiety, and some are taking advantage of the circumstances to

take the property of others, take things from stores, thinking they're not going to receive help. There is no reason to fall into exaggerated desperation knowing that the state is present." A state of emergency has been declared in the regions of Ica and Canete.

The international media reported numerous complaints of a lack of medical attention and medical supplies.

In Pisco, where Garcia toured the scenes of destruction, imploring residents yelled, "Help us, help us," as he passed by, according to CNN. "Please wait; have patience," Garcia responded.

The Peruvian and international media carried stories of terror, especially for those living in the poorer districts of the coastal towns. Eugenia Imara Mariño, 45, who lives in a valley in San Juan, a town south of Lima, told the *Miami Herald*: "Big rocks fell off the side of the earth. I thought my life was over," she said. Imara Mariño shares a one-bedroom wooden house with her three children and her elderly father. She was running a bath Wednesday evening when "the floor beneath her shook and the walls looked ready to collapse. She looked outside and saw rocks falling." She told the newspaper, "I don't have anything. My house is worth pennies. I immediately started thinking about my son and my daughters. We were going to die."

The *Los Angeles Times* carried the comments of a 32-year-old Ica resident, Marina Yupanki, whose adobe home was destroyed in the quake. "Sir, we are afraid," she told a reporter for Canal N, a cable television news station. "We are sick; we are seeking help for our children." According to the *Times*, "Others said they feared returning to their homes, worried about new tremors and collapses. 'We are not going back in our houses again,' Clara Obregon, 65, of Ica, told Canal N. 'We plan to stay out here on the streets. We want tents and something to eat. We haven't eaten.' "

Residents in the nearby fishing port of Cerro Azul left their homes when waves began crashing over the seawall. Many people in the region headed for higher ground out of fear of a tsunami.

A natural disaster knows no social bias, but it occurs in a society that does. In earthquakes, tornadoes and floods, working class families who live in the most poorly constructed houses or in the most vulnerable areas inevitably suffer the most. And the unequal impact of such a calamity is magnified in an especially impoverished country.

Fifty-four percent of Peru's population lives in poverty. The United Nations Development Program estimates that

19 percent live in "absolute poverty," meaning they survive on less than \$US1 a day.

The top 10 percent of the Peruvian population controls 35.4 percent of the national wealth, while the bottom 10 percent controls just 1.6 percent. In 2006, incomes increased less than 1 percent while business profits grew 141 percent. In the last five years, 200,000 Peruvians have migrated annually, compared to an average of 58,000 a year in the 1990s. In 2005, 319,000 left the country.

In sum, millions of Peruvians live in misery in shantytowns, while a wealthy handful live in Lima's "upscale neighborhoods, most of which are a cross between Miami homes and Spanish villas," in the words of one commentator.

Garcia, who won a runoff election for the presidency in June 2006 and took office in July, promised a reversal of the free-market policies identified with the disastrous regime of Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s. He has reneged on his promises, fueling discontent.

Last month, millions of Peruvians went on strike, organized marches and occupied public buildings. Peru's teachers, woefully underpaid (a flat US\$4,000 regardless of seniority and experience), played a significant role in the struggle against the government. Public sector doctors were on strike when the earthquake occurred and called off their action in response to the disaster. The regime is no doubt extremely nervous in the aftermath of the quake, given the rising level of social unrest.

In the wake of the earthquake, promises of foreign aid to Peru have been miserly. The UN offered US\$1 million in assistance, while the European Union said it would approve aid worth 1 million euros (US\$1.3 million). The US Agency for International Development pledged US\$100,000.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact