

As residents protest lack of aid

Peruvian president sends troops into earthquake-ravaged region

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21 August 2007

Peru's central government has announced the deployment of troops to the cities of Pisco and Ica in the country's south, citing the need to stop looting in the wake of the massive earthquake that struck last Wednesday evening. Fearing a social explosion, special forces patrols are already in Pisco, where 80 percent of all structures collapsed or have been damaged as a result of the quake.

The earthquake, measuring a magnitude 8 on the Richter Scale, with an epicenter about 150 kilometers (90 miles) off Peru's coast, killed between 540 and 650 people, including 380 in the town of Pisco, 160 of whom were the victims of a collapse of the San Clemente Church. The earthquake was followed by days of strong aftershocks affecting central and southern Peru.

In Ica, police fired on people emptying pharmacies and food stores to meet the needs of desperate earthquake victims. Government officials justified their actions by claiming that the earthquake had damaged a jail and allowed 600 prisoners to escape, whom they blamed for the looting. In Pisco there were reports of police standing by, and even helping, while hungry earthquake victims took food and other items from stores and delivery trucks.

Residents are complaining of a lack of services and food and there are complaints of price gouging from some stores in the region. Pisco and Ica are in dire need of 30,000 tents to provide refuge for the victims. Many of those whose homes were left relatively unscathed are now sleeping outdoors, fearing another aftershock to the earthquake that struck on August 15.

Southwest Peru is facing a humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands have been left without homes,

medical services, and even food. The government admits that it is unable to provide health services for all the wounded. The Red Cross reports that, despite its best efforts, people are being sheltered in damaged buildings, thousands have no access to toilets or to potable water, and that an epidemic is beginning to spread. In addition to cholera and diarrhea, the choking dust raised by the earthquake is causing respiratory problems.

Initially, President Alan García promised that all the collapsed homes would be rebuilt in cement and that everything in the region would be "more beautiful." While visiting Pisco on Sunday, however, García changed his tune and pledged harsh measures against the looting, promising to restore law and order, no matter the cost.

The Mexican daily *La Jornada* reports that government troops are stationed only in downtown Pisco, suggesting that their main purpose is to protect downtown business interests and that the reports of looting and stealing have been exaggerated. The director of a hospital in the town of Chíncha reported that people attempted to loot the hospital because they thought they would find food there. There have been no reports of looting of homes and Juan Alvarez, chief of operations of the Peruvian police, admitted that there have been few problems.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reported long lines of people waiting for water and blankets and complaining of government neglect. In some cases people had food, but no means to cook it.

There is little doubt that Peru was ill-prepared for an earthquake of this magnitude. The looting, if the reports are true, is a direct consequence of the incompetent

manner in which the García administration approached this catastrophe. Five days after the earthquake, there is not enough food and help is not being well coordinated. Beyond Pisco and Ica, two coastal cities less than 160 miles (266 kilometers) from Lima along the Pan American Highway, small towns remain isolated. While the damage was greatest along the coast, it extends inland to towns located in the Andes mountains.

Inhabitants of these mountain towns, calling in to radio talk shows, pleaded for help and insisted they had been abandoned by the government. In the bluffs immediately above the Pisco River, people stood by their collapsed homes saying that they had no food and insufficient blankets. When a helicopter landed to the north of Ica, it was met by people chanting, “We want food!”

Over the weekend, 20 people arrived in Chincha, north of Pisco, after having walked 80 kilometers (47 miles) from the interior city of Huancavelica to ask for help. They reported that there is no water, that children have no food, and that people are sleeping in the streets.

Peru is deeply polarized—socially, ethnically and geographically. Fifty percent of Peruvians live on less than two dollars a day and income inequality has been on the rise for more than a generation. Conditions are even more explosive in southern and central Peru, inhabited by impoverished Quechua-speaking workers and peasants.

The earthquake has revealed the deep social divide existing in Peru. Forty-five thousand homes, inhabited by the poor, were constructed of mud and straw and could not withstand the shock wave. The estimated 20,000 to 80,000 people left homeless have few options and are among the most oppressed layers of Peruvian society.

The Peruvian coast marks the boundary of the Nazca and South American tectonic plates, which are converging upon each other, with the South American plate moving over the Nazca plate. Historically, this geologic movement has produced very strong earthquakes, which can strike suddenly and are often hard to predict. But precautions can be taken, including early warning systems, proper building codes, the storage of rescue equipment, etc. None of this was present in the current situation. Primitive building techniques and the absence of earthquake contingency

plans were a recipe for disaster.



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