

# Ecuador earthquake kills hundreds

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18 April 2016

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Ecuador on Saturday evening, killing at least 246 people, injuring thousands more, and destroying infrastructure in a large swath of the South American nation. The death toll was expected to rise on Monday as collapsed buildings are excavated. It was the region's strongest earthquake since 1979.

The epicenter of the quake was twelve miles underground near the town of Muisine, on the north-central coast not far from the Colombian border, according to the US Geological Survey. Heavy aftershocks, some as powerful as magnitude 5.6, continued after the first earthquake, which reportedly lasted for over 40 seconds.

Deaths have been reported in the provinces of Manabí, Esmeraldas and Guayas. Among Ecuador's cities, extreme damage was reported in Pedernales, a coastal town of some 40,000. Portoviejo, the capital of Manabí province, was also devastated. Buildings collapsed in Guayaquil, Ecuador's most populous city. Quito, the capital, lost power but reported less damage and no deaths.

"We're trying to do the most we can, but there's almost nothing we can do," Pedernales Mayor Gabriel Alcivar told the media. "This wasn't just a house that collapsed, it was an entire town."

President Rafael Correa, who was on a state visit to Italy at the time of the quake, imposed a national state of emergency in six of the country's 24 provinces.

There has reportedly been little organized emergency response from the government or volunteer organizations. Rescue efforts were hindered by an absence of readily available earthmoving equipment. Desperate residents dug through debris with their hands, as those trapped under rubble called out for help.

"We hear screaming all through the night," said Luis Quito, a resident of Pedernales. "There are humans trapped below the terrace. Babies. We need rescuers.

But nobody has arrived so far."

The Correa government deployed some 13,500 security forces "to keep order around Ecuador," while the Red Cross called on 800 volunteers to assist. Venezuela, Chile and Mexico said they would send supplies and personnel.

Correa said Ecuador would tap into \$600 million from international lenders to rebuild, and currently had \$300 million at its disposal for earthquake response. This is \$50 million less than the production cost of one the US Air Force's nearly 200 F-22 fighter jets. As of Sunday evening, the Obama administration had made no concrete offer of assistance, though Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the US "stands ready to assist and support."

Earthquakes occur with regularity in Ecuador. Over 1,000 were killed by a series of powerful tremors in 1987. In 1979, an 8.2 magnitude earthquake off the coast generated a tsunami that killed over 600 and injured 20,000 more.

The consequences of yesterday's earthquake are made worse by Ecuador's poverty. With a population of 16 million, Ecuador's gross domestic product of approximately \$100 billion is considerably less than the combined wealth of the two richest Americans, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. GDP per capita, at approximately \$6,000, is one ninth that in the US.

In spite of the "left" pretensions of the Correa administration, which has been in office since 2007, Ecuador remains one of the world's most unequal countries in terms of wealth distribution. Poorly built concrete houses and shantytowns that provide shelter for much of the population reportedly came down throughout the country from the force of the earthquake.

The earthquake intersects with a deep crisis in Ecuador and South America as a whole. Ecuador, which aligned itself with Venezuela, Brazil and

Argentina in a “leftward” turn under the Correa government, has been hammered by falling oil prices, which previously accounted for roughly 40 percent of its export earnings, along with decreasing prices for basic agricultural and mineral commodities, which account for much of the rest. Economic growth for the coming year, even before the earthquake, was projected at near zero.

The same day the earthquake hit, Ecuadorian Hydrocarbons Minister Carlos Pareja was in Doha appealing to OPEC countries to cut oil production. “There is a need for a committee that will monitor the capping of production,” Pareja told reporters Sunday. “The negative consequences [of overproduction] will be enormous, and not only for Latin America; we are talking about the whole world.”

Declining oil and commodity prices, combined with a strengthening dollar, pose particular problems to Ecuador because it adopted the US currency as its own national currency following the country’s 1998-1999 banking crisis. Ecuador cannot devalue its currency, making its other major exports, including bananas, more expensive and less competitive on the global market. Yields on Ecuadorean government debt briefly surged to 18 percent last fall.



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