

Death toll rises in Ecuador earthquake

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21 April 2016

The death toll from the powerful earthquakes that struck Ecuador's Pacific shore on April 16 rose to 553 Wednesday, with far many more still counted among the missing.

The quake, which measured 7.8 on the Richter scale, shook Ecuador's northern coast near the Colombian border. It was felt along the coast and inland, as far south as Peru, and caused a blackout in Ecuador's capital, Quito. The quake, the most intense since 1979, lasted for a long time and was followed by hundreds of aftershocks.

These are "difficult moments for our nation," declared President Rafael Correa, who declared this quake was "the greatest tragedy in 67 years," (since the Ambato Earthquake of August 5, 1949). Hundreds of homes have been destroyed and residents have been left without shelter, and with inadequate food and water.

The earthquake's epicenter was between the cities of Pedernales and Cojímies in Manabí province, 310 kilometers northwest of Quito. Also severely impacted were the coastal provinces of Esmeralda, on the Colombian border, and Guayas. Further west, the provinces of Santa Elena, and Santo Domingo de Tsáchilas also shook. On Wednesday April 20, a second earthquake, measuring 6.1 on the Richter scale, hit the already devastated region.

The coastal region is a center of tourism, and also includes some of the poorest inhabitants of that Andean nation. Ecuador as a whole is one of the most impoverished and socially polarized nations in Latin America. With poverty rates of over 50 percent (and more than 60 percent on the north coast), Ecuador is the fourth poorest country in South America. Young people in the region are often forced to migrate, and their families depend on the funds that they send back.

In addition to the dead, as of Wednesday there were more than 4,500 reported injured, while estimates of the number missing varied widely. The attorney general

put the figure at 1,700, while the Defense Ministry estimated 231. Many remain trapped in the rubble of homes, hotels and bridges. Teams from Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador and other Latin American nations are helping with the rescue effort, which is made more difficult by the flooding of coastal highways. The death toll is expected to continue rising.

Four days after the quake, there were signs of growing anger among the residents of Esmeralda and Manabí. According to the Madrid daily *El País*, in addition to the residents' worries over the destruction of roads, homes and telephone links, there are shortages of water and food. The Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* interviewed Pedernales residents: "We sleep in cars, in the street. While my family and I have managed to find food, we are in bad shape, very bad shape," declared Steve Castro.

In Pedernales, a city of 56,000 inhabitants, both the extent of the damage and the absence of basic resources, belie a serious lack of foresight--indifference really--to the effects of a major earthquake in the region. There were no body bags in the towns of the region, no portable bathrooms, no emergency lights, no mosquito netting and no stored food, not even disposable gloves. Outside of downtown, corpses are seen on sidewalks, covered with blankets and waiting to be picked up. Many of the survivors had no protection against the rain that followed the earthquake; others, fearing a Tsunami wave, moved into the hills above Pedernales.

Further south, in Puertoviejo, survivors are living in makeshift tents in the Cayanbe public park, where entire families congregate with whatever belongings they have managed to salvage. Doctors at a nearby mobile clinic report that the dust stirred up by the collapsing structures caused allergic reactions in many; this problem is compounded by weakness and dehydration due to the scarcity of food.

Pedernales Mayor Gabriel Alcívar has called for voluntary rationing, such as people sharing water bottles. Alcívar has appealed for more rescue workers in his city, while at the same time pointing out that all those volunteers also need to be fed and sheltered.

Many mobile hospital units, promised by President Correa, have yet to arrive. The Colombian government has announced plans to deliver humanitarian assistance, such as emergency rations, portable sanitary facilities and blankets.

“The only element in abundance, is human resources,” writes *El País*, “the last group of corpses found on Sunday were found at midnight by a group of fire fighters from Machachi and Tabacundo [towns near Quito] that had labored for more than 10 hours and only stopped when they found five people that were patrons of the Chimborazo hotel, whose three stories collapsed.” Captain José Velázquez, who led this indefatigable team declared: “this is very traumatic. We found a child and father, hugging each other, who had been imprisoned by a collapsed metal gate. To see that was very hard on us.” The firefighters are being aided by hundreds of volunteers who mostly arrived on their own from across Ecuador and Colombia. Late on Tuesday, six people were found alive in the city of Manta. Many of the volunteers and much of the material aid has arrived through spontaneous drives on social media.

Given the high temperatures in the region (well over 30 degrees Celsius--86 degrees Fahrenheit), the stench of death has invaded the towns in the region, and is expected to get worse. Mosquito swarms have become a problem. The World Health Organization and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) issued a warning Tuesday about the danger of eruptions of the Zika virus, dengue and other diseases carried by mosquitoes. The warning indicated that stagnant waters and the lack of working sewers, even in government-provided shelters, all contributed to outbreaks of diseases. UNICEF also worries about the lack of sanitation and poor-quality water, particularly in the coastal communities, which are among the most impoverished in Ecuador.

Marcela, an elderly Manabí resident, originally from Colombia, declared, “Everything that we are living through reminds us of other tragedies in Colombia, such as the Armero landslide and the Armenia

earthquake.”

All the elements are in place for a public health emergency: high heat, coupled with lack of water and sanitation, food shortages and mosquitoes. Though people have been pulled alive from the rubble, clearly time is running out for those that may still be alive among the ruins.

Further south the most affected area was the port city of Guayaquil, though not directly on the coast. It was there that an important bridge in the center of town collapsed, as well as homes and downtown shopping centers. A young woman was reported dead from collapsing debris at a shopping center. A motorist was killed when a pedestrian pathway collapsed on his automobile at the Guayaquil airport.

President Correa estimates that the reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure will cost Ecuador some US\$3 billion, 3 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. The disaster comes on top of the country’s slide into deep recession driven primarily by the fall in the price of oil. The International Monetary Fund has forecast a 4.5 percent contraction of Ecuador’s economy this year.

Facing demonstrations and mass strikes by Ecuadorean workers and the indigenous population, Correa has been forced to renounce a bid for another presidential term.



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