

Strong earthquake shakes Mexico and Central America, killing at least 61

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The most intense earthquake to hit the area in one hundred years, measuring 8.2 on the Richter scale, shook southwest Mexico and Central America on Thursday. At last count, at least 61 were dead in Mexico and at least 200 have been injured, mostly in the state of Oaxaca. The death toll is expected to rise.

The epicenter of the earthquake was 40 miles (69 kilometers) under the surface of the Pacific Ocean and parallel to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec that separates North America from Central America, 60 miles (100km) from the city of Tonalá, in the state of Chiapas. Tsunami warnings were issued for the coasts of Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The earthquake struck at around midnight Thursday; some 50 million people felt it across southern and central Mexico. In Mexico City, the swaying buildings were reminiscent of the 1985 quake that killed well over ten thousand of its inhabitants.

While there were scenes of panic in Mexico City, there were only two casualties of people hit by falling debris. Following the 1985 earthquake, the government tightened earthquake regulations for that city and installed alarms that woke citizens up and gave them time to escape.

However, given Mexico's endemic corruption and cronyism, it is not completely possible to determine how effective the new codes are, since the epicenter of this latest earthquake was two times the distance from Mexico City relative to the one in 1985.

Power lines fell, buildings collapsed and walls fell in the eastern part of the sprawling metropolis of twenty million inhabitants. Throughout Mexico, nearly two million people were left without electricity.

The citizens of Morelia, Puebla, and Guadalajara also felt the earthquake, which triggered tsunami waves one meter high (3.3 feet), near the Oaxaca port of Salinas

Cruz. The Mexican Navy evacuated eight thousand people from low-lying areas along the coast.

The earthquake also affected El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras resulting in injuries, power outages and the widespread destruction of poorly built buildings and roads. In northwest Guatemala the earthquake took a heavy toll in the impoverished communities surrounding the municipality of Tacaná, along the border with Chiapas; homes were demolished, as was the public school in Sujchay.

Both in Oaxaca and in Chiapas, and on the Guatemalan border, many homes built of adobe clay and palm leaves quickly collapsed. Many residents were rescued by neighbors but more victims may still be trapped beneath the rubble.

The destruction was not limited to adobe buildings, however. Also affected were apartment and other buildings in cities across Chiapas and Oaxaca, despite higher earthquake standards that were established after the 1985 quake.

Oaxaca authorities reported damage in most of the municipalities in that state. In Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas the walls of the city hall cracked, also damaged were the two towers the Church of Saint Lucia. A historic monument was knocked over in the Chiapas capital city of Tuxtla Guerrero. In the same city, the Church of San Vicente Ferrer, a sixteenth century structure, was destroyed.

In the city of Oaxaca, capital of the state of Oaxaca, the city hall was partially destroyed. A hotel collapsed in Matis Romero, Oaxaca.

By far the most damage was concentrated in Juchitan de Zaragoza, a city of more than 100,000 inhabitants and third largest in the state of Oaxaca. A reporting team touring the city discovered many collapsed buildings and homes. There is no electricity and only

intermittent Wi-Fi.

The only public hospital was heavily damaged; the injured were being treated out of doors. Also in ruins is the city's government house, schools, churches, bridges and roads. As news reporters travelled the city, neighbors informed them of people trapped in the rubble, including in the government building.

The Juchitan Fire Department, which even before the quake was insufficient for a city of its size, was unable to fully respond to all the calls for help. Many of those that were transported to clinics outside Juchitan did so in vehicles volunteered by residents of the city, since there are not enough ambulances. Juchitan's suburbs are in the same sad shape.

The near destruction of Juchitan is an indictment of the authorities' criminal neglect of public safety and the failure to implement proper infrastructure and emergency measures in anticipation of major earthquakes, particularly in an area where three major seismic faults coincide.

While Mexico City residents benefited from early warning systems, and perhaps from updated building codes, this was not the case for the residents of Oaxaca and Chiapas. The Juchitan earthquake building codes proved woefully inadequate, as did the size of its fire department, search and rescue system and the number of available emergency vehicles, leaving residents on their own.



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