Mexico earthquake death toll climbs to 98

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More than one week after southern Mexico and Guatemala were hit at midnight by an 8.2 earthquake, the strongest in almost a century, food and basic supplies are still scarce in the affected areas, efforts to find victims continue and thousands are sleeping on the streets after losing their homes.

The official death toll currently stands at 98, and the state governments have reported 80,000 damaged homes, along with 1,000 schools, and 96 health facilities. While the total number of people in need of aid has climbed to 2.5 million, the damage and casualties were heavily concentrated in the most impoverished areas of the two poorest states of the country, Oaxaca and Chiapas. Guatemala suffered no casualties, but 605 homes were reported damaged.

Just as with Hurricane Harvey a week earlier in southeast Texas and Hurricane Irma at the same time in the Caribbean and later in Florida, the historic earthquake in Mexico has exposed conditions of staggering inequality, deteriorated social infrastructure and corrupt negligence on the part of the ruling elites.

The deteriorated state of relations between the US and Mexican governments was also made visible. On Tuesday, the Mexican Foreign Ministry cancelled the sending of a convoy of food and medical aid to the areas affected by Hurricane Harvey in Texas in order to direct those resources to the areas impacted by the earthquake.

The Mexican ministry further indicated that the US had not responded to their formal offer of aid after a week, while Trump waited a full week to offer condolences for the losses inflicted by the devastating earthquake. He spoke to President Enrique Peña Nieto only on Thursday, claiming he could not do so earlier because of problems with “cell phone reception.”

This response was in line with his administration’s “America First” program, threatening to “terminate” NAFTA and force Mexico to pay for a border wall. Moreover, the Mexican foreign minister had complained last week that thousands of its citizens will be “potentially affected by the decision” to revoke the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Under these conditions of perceived animosity toward Latin America’s second largest economy and Washington’s top military partner in the region, next to Colombia, US Defense Secretary James Mattis, travel to Mexico City to attend the Independence Day festivities over the weekend. Despite the guise of aid and solidarity, many Mexicans will appropriately perceive that the fifth-ever visit of the Pentagon chief to the country is intended to remind Mexico’s comprador elite of their semi-colonial status and commitments to US security demands.

It was also announced yesterday that the tropical storm Norma is approaching the Pacific coast of Mexico threatening Baja California with high winds and heavy rains.

This storm comes shortly after yet another hurricane hit the state of Veracruz along the Atlantic coast last Friday, leaving seventy thousand people without electricity and two dead from a mudslide.

On Wednesday, the President Peña Nieto travelled to Oaxaca and set off a wave of indignation after he asked “respectfully” that the media not act as “indicators or critics of what is missing, but be part of the solution.”

This was merely the final the drop of cynicism that caused the glass to overflow. A series of denunciations followed in the bourgeois press, led by the conservative *El Universal*. A column by Carlos Loret de Mola warns that the deadly 1985 earthquake provoked the formation of the political organizations that “fed militants into the nascent PRD,” referring to the Party of Democratic Revolution. He concludes his piece abruptly: “Let’s see what sprouts out of the earthquake… politically speaking”.

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This uneasiness goes beyond fears that the earthquake will affect the ruling party in the general elections next year or that it will lead to the formation of other right-wing, nationalist organizations like PRD and its offspring Morena. What preoccupies the ruling class the most is that its criminal negligence exposed by the earthquake leads to the independent mobilization of the working class, leading the peasant and impoverished masses against the governments' agenda of militarization and austerity diktats from Wall Street and the City of London.

Only eight months ago, workers carried out mass demonstrations all across the country in response to a 20 percent gas price hike or *gasolinazo* as part of the government's energy privatization scheme. Already, the earthquake has been trailed by bold acts of protest in southwest Mexico.

Last Tuesday, about 200 peasants in Tapachula, Chiapas, calling for running water, electricity, street maintenance and security, clashed with the police, which responded with beatings, tear gas, and at least a dozen arrests. The next day, protesting the disappearances of their classmates in 2014, 60 teacher students or *normalistas* from Ayotzinapa seized a bus, a tanker truck with fuel, and other vehicles, and allegedly kidnapped four police officials. The Guerrero police fired live rounds at their caravan, intercepted it and arrested twelve students.

Last week, expert in disaster management and geologist Nieves Sánchez Guitián declared that, unlike the 8.1 earthquake in 1985 that killed tens of thousands, the recent one was off the coast and twice as deep. Nonetheless, she concluded that, after 32 years, "the key to escape the cycle in which poverty leads to more poverty with a catastrophe" remains the same, technical preparedness and prevention.

The hardest-hit states have been long recognized as the poorest of the country. According to the National Council of Evaluation of Social Policies (Coneval), only 7.4 of the population in Oaxaca is *not* considered poor or vulnerable, compared to 10.3 percent in 2012. In Chiapas, this figure is 6.4 percent. This is in a country in which 1 percent of Mexicans own one third of the country's wealth.

Juchitán de Zaragoza, one of the two poorest districts of Oaxaca with over half of the population people living below official extreme poverty, was the most affected. Thirty-six people died and about one-third of its homes were fully destroyed. The mayor complained that "assistance is lacking" and that there is no "close coordination with the government".

The newspaper *La Jornada* reported that the distribution of food, medicines, clothes, and personal items has depended on the initiative of neighbors, families and friends. A painter, Francisco Toledo, organized the establishment of 20 community kitchens, while a retired teacher Virginia López delivers food to the thousands sleeping on the streets.

"Those affected have not received any provisions", says López, while the government announced that it is deploying over 4,000 military officials presumably to help with the distribution. A peasant in Ixtepec told EFE: "The Army is not supporting us, it only goes by like a parade. What is required from them is help to remove the debris".

A 2015 study by the Inter-American Development Bank found that Mexico already dedicates a lower percentage of its GDP to social infrastructure than any other Latin American country. Nonetheless, the government's response to the disaster has centered around tax breaks and loans to small business ostensibly to "accelerate the reactivation of the economy" in Chiapas and Oaxaca.

Tellingly, the Wall Street credit agency Moody's discarded offhand that the official response will go beyond meager economic aid to affected families under the natural disaster fund Fonden, noting simply that the economic cost of the disaster will be "limited".

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