

Death toll in Mexico City earthquake reaches 286

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By Friday afternoon, the official death toll from Tuesday's earthquake in Mexico had reached 286. Mexico City, the nation's capital, accounted for 148 of those deaths. Over 3,800 buildings were damaged in Mexico City alone, of which over 40 had entirely collapsed.

The building collapses led to intensive efforts to search through rubble to locate survivors. Nineteen students and six adults died when a school in Mexico City collapsed. Dozens are still missing or unaccounted for.

The epicenter of the quake was approximately 75 miles southeast of Mexico City, in Puebla state. Some small cities and towns in that and nearby states, such as Morelos and Mexico, also suffered a significant number of deaths and major damage, including the destruction of many adobe brick structures.

Seismologists are suggesting that the quake was not of a "subduction" nature, where one of the earth's plates sinks below another. Such earthquakes generate the largest magnitudes and destructive power, including the 8.2 temblor that occurred on September 7 off the coast of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, and the massive 8.1 quake in 1985 centered on the Michoacán coast, 200 miles west-southwest of Mexico City, which led to the deaths of at least 10,000 people.

Mexico City, with a population of nearly nine million, and other portions of the neighboring metropolitan zone, encompassing 25 million people, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of earthquakes because much of the area once consisted of a series of interlocking lakes, which were later dried up and filled in. This includes Lake Texcoco, on whose lakebed the city now rests.

Given the thick deposits of sand and clay and the often muddy nature of much of these sedimentary

basins, earthquake waves passing through them can be as much as one hundred times stronger than they would be otherwise. This is a phenomenon that does not occur on this scale in any other major urban area in the world. It is why Tuesday's quake shook the Mexico City more violently than other areas that were a similar distance from the epicenter.

In a rational society organized to meet human needs, this hyper-susceptibility to earthquake damage in an area populated by tens of millions of people would result in massive efforts to maximize the protection of lives and structures. Not so in a highly unequal society dominated by an oligarchy that does not allow the needed resources to be diverted from its own enrichment.

The government of then-President Miguel de la Madrid of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI, the party currently in power, reacted with criminal indifference to the 1985 earthquake. The government's rescue efforts in the first days after the quake were wholly inadequate, and it rejected international aid. The inept federal response left millions to fend for themselves.

The ensuing mass outrage led to a certain upgrade of building codes and some increase in enforcement. But the building requirements that were put in place fell far short of what was needed, even if adhered to. For example, in the massive slums that ring Mexico City, millions live in poorly constructed homes that building regulations do not address. Many dangerous structures in the city center were not torn down or adequately reinforced.

Many of the changes to building codes following the 1985 quake were aimed at reinforcing the 8th to 13th floors of buildings that suffered the most damage in the center of the city. But Tuesday's quake affected lower

floors and lower buildings to a much greater extent, most likely because the wave generated by the more local earthquake was not in the nature of a plate subduction.

As in the hugely inadequate response of the US government to the recent hurricanes in Texas and Florida, most rescue and aid efforts after Tuesday's quake in Mexico fell to working class volunteers.

The city's populace spontaneously took to the streets, distributing food, water and blankets, and digging people free from the rubble, often with bare hands. Experienced volunteer brigades of so-called "moles" undertook the most dangerous building searches.

The Mexican government once again conducted itself in a reprehensible manner. It engaged in a 30-hour media spectacle, broadcasting live the efforts of security forces and emergency workers who were searching the rubble of the collapsed school where 26 died in search of a 12-year-old girl, known only as "Frida Sofía." Senior Mexican officials, including Education Secretary Aurelio Nuño, spent hours at the school in an attempt to portray themselves as lifesaving heroes. Later the government conceded that the girl never existed.

On Tuesday, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto cut short a planned visit to areas pummeled by the September 7 Oaxaca quake, heading back to the capital to deal with the new quake. But before he left for Oaxaca, he provided figures on the scale of the damage from the September 7 quake in the two hardest hit states, Oaxaca and Chiapas: 99 had died and 2,600 schools and upwards of 100,000 homes had been severely damaged, a large percentage beyond repair.

Almost half of all households live in poverty in these poor southern states. Some 70 percent of Oaxaca's population earns less than what is needed to satisfy basic family needs, according to the government agency Coneval, and 77 percent of people in Chiapas. In both states, low-income families earn as little as 37 pesos (US\$2) per day, less than half the Mexican minimum wage.

Such poverty necessarily makes the impact of earthquakes considerably worse. Yet these are the states that have the least influence with the federal government in terms of receiving disaster aid and reconstruction funding.

The 1985 earthquake ignited a move to the left

among the populace. In response, a new party split off from the PRI—the Party of the Democratic Revolution. This party has by now been thoroughly exposed as just another handmaiden of the ruling elite. The earthquakes this month further discredit an already massively unpopular government.



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