

Thousands continue to suffer in the wake of Mexico's earthquakes

Don Knowland
18 October 2017

On Friday, the death toll from the September 7 and 19 earthquakes that devastated southern Mexico and Mexico City had officially reached 471. That same day another earthquake, 5.5 in magnitude, struck Mexico off the coast of the state of Oaxaca, near the epicenter of the huge 8.1 September 7 temblor.

Speaking from the National Palace on Friday—the International Day for Disaster Reduction—Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto said that due to the loss of human lives and damage from the September temblors, “Mexico is now a much stronger country, with greater social awareness and a sense of community.” He called on Mexicans to “recognize and put above” the damage and suffering the “unity of Mexicans, their solidarity” and the “love for Mexico [that] is the passion of all Mexicans ... and the great strength of Mexico.”

Peña Nieto claimed that “at this moment we have the integrity, the full capacity, the institutional strength to face this challenge and to support the population that was damaged”; that Mexico today has “a society with greater awareness of civil protection and [earthquake] prevention ... with greater capacity of the institutions of the Mexican State at all its levels ... to work at preventive tasks.”

In the same vein, Interior Minister Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong added that the earthquake disasters gave Mexicans the “opportunity to realize the potential that we have when we work together, the opportunity to meet again in the solidarity that distinguishes us.”

What empty blather, smuggled in under the guise of an imaginary classless national interest! The reality of Mexico is that of a divided, horribly unequal society in which a small layer at the top lords over the mass of the population. This is the capitalist reality that precludes working together on a mass scale to meet critical human needs.

The truth is that the corrupt Mexican government, which operates as the instrument of international capital and the Mexican oligarchy, had more than ample “opportunity,” especially in the wake of the 1985 earthquake that killed tens of thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands, to anticipate or take serious measures to reduce the extent of the damage. It failed miserably to do so. Nor has the government made serious efforts to aid those devastated by the September earthquakes.

It was instead the immediate efforts of the Mexican working class—those thousands of civilians who volunteered long hours to help those affected—that for the first couple of weeks provided the critical response in terms of food, water, supplies, equipment, medical aid, psychological counseling, and searching for victims in collapsed buildings.

Peña Nieto had to acknowledge the efforts of those civilian volunteers, but cynically used them to push his fairy tale that all Mexicans had learned from the earthquakes to work together regardless of their status or circumstances. He heaped praise on the Mexican Army, the Navy and the Federal Police, forces that, as usual, were slow to respond with emergency relief, and focused their immediate concerns on forestalling any threat of civil unrest.

On Friday, Oxfam Mexico also issued a statement of its findings as to

the response to the earthquakes, presenting the real state of affairs.

Government failure to prepare for earthquakes

The emergency caused by the September earthquakes, it reported, showed the authorities’ “ignorance about the mechanisms and rules for responding to a humanitarian crisis, both those established by the country and international minimum standards.”

The statement went on: “In the three entities mentioned, problems of coordination between the government, civil society and affected people were detected. The response of civil society surpassed the capacity of government institutions to channel the donated aid.”

Another important shortcoming, according to Alejandra d’Hyver, coordinator of the Reduction of Risks of Disasters and humanitarian aid for the charitable organization, was that “the authorities have not made an adequate census of the damage and of the people affected, and the limited information available is not disaggregated by sex or age group, which makes it difficult to address the specific needs of children, women, the elderly and people with disabilities.” D’Hyver noted that the evaluation of the Oxfam Mexico field team showed that the most affected population is comprised of low-income people, and especially women, a much higher percentage of whom work from home, and who have seen increased workloads in terms of care (in part due to school closings), lost income and jobs.

That is, once again, the working class and poor have borne the brunt of the damage from the failure of the government to adequately prepare and plan for major earthquakes.

As to replacement shelters, “although shelters were set up, many people only come to receive help (water, food, sanitation and hygiene), but refuse to stay because the facilities do not have adequate physical conditions or for fear of belongings they have left in their homes being stolen, which indicates the urgent need for housing reconstruction.”

“We must combat the structural vulnerabilities evidenced by recent earthquakes and prevent them from reproducing during the recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction stages, in order to prevent loss of lives and livelihoods in future earthquakes,” concluded d’Hyver.

These findings made a mockery of Peña Nieto’s claim on Friday that “the most important” effort of the government at the moment “is to ensure that families who lost their homes may very soon have a new space to return to live.”

Urgent housing need

About 40 buildings in Mexico City completely collapsed during the 7.1 magnitude September 19 earthquake. But upwards of 4,000 were so badly damaged that the structures have been or will be deemed uninhabitable. Many housed hundreds of residents, so those without lodging number in the thousands.

An example is a building that collapsed in the Tlaplan delegation (borough) in southern Mexico City that was the subject of dramatic television coverage, as teams of rescuers pulled nine bodies from the rubble of the collapsed six-story structure, as well as 18 who survived. That building was one of 10 damaged in a complex that housed 500 apartments and more than 1,500 people.

Residents of the complex provided a snapshot of the city's working and lower "middle" classes, including teachers, small businessmen, pensioners, public-sector employees and office workers. Many are now without housing, shelter or significant financial resources. As for some who were able to purchase apartments through social security subsidies, that was their only significant asset.

Many of those displaced by the earthquakes lived on fixed incomes such as small pensions, and most lacked insurance. Many are forced to double up with relatives, friends or in public shelters. Others must resort to temporary structures to find refuge.

Many await word from inspectors as to whether their buildings will be safe enough to return to. As one retired employee with a wife and two children from the Tlapan complex told the *Los Angeles Times* last week, "No one tells us anything. We don't know when we can go back to our homes. It could be months."

Doctors Without Borders reported last week, based on assessments made by teams in the field, that there are also "high levels of anxiety, fear, and hyperalertness" among those displaced.

Miguel Ángel Mancera Espinosa, the mayor of Mexico City, warned at a Friday press conference that his government will not permit improvised housing. The mayor cited a group in the Iztapalapa delegation that tried to convince neighbors to settle in camps of structures made with poles and sheets. Mancera Espinosa emphasized that such "people's camps," camps that lasted "forever" following the 1985 earthquake, would be dismantled, but his government thus far has not taken serious steps to provide alternative shelter.

His government only recently started a program to cover interim rent payments and provide low-interest housing loans and grants. This Mexico City Rebuilding, Recovery and Transformation Plan adopted at the end of September allocates the paltry sum of \$2.8 million to restore over 10,000 buildings affected by the earthquake.

People are rightly skeptical as they fill out the aid forms. The government does not say when it is going to provide aid, and the amount surely will not be enough to resettle.

On Friday, Mancera Espinosa directed most of his attention to new building regulations he said would be in place within three weeks, which would focus on rules for new buildings and a regulatory framework for restructuring the buildings that were severely damaged by the September 19 earthquake.

This is an old and discredited song. After the 1985 earthquake, regulations were adopted as to new building, and reinforcement of existing damaged structures. The regulations were either inadequate or largely unenforced.

A high number of the buildings that suffered substantial damage in the September 19 earthquake were new or recently remodeled buildings. Many were the subject of citizen complaints about safety, according to an investigation and report by the *Guardian* newspaper.

Since 2012, Mexico City residents lodged on the order of 6,000 complaints about construction project violations. In 2016 alone, residents filed 1,271 complaints with the Environmental and Zoning Prosecutor's Office as to violations of zoning or land use ordinances. Residents and advocacy organizations say the city government did not act on the vast majority of complaints, which were often made in response to visual damage following earthquakes, or that there is no public record of a response. When city reviews were done as to what repairs were required, they often were not communicated. When complaints were reviewed and passed on to the City Urban Development and Housing Secretariat (Seduvi) to act on, usually nothing happened.

Developers easily circumvented the regulations due to lax city enforcement, or outright corruption.

"I have not seen a single sanction," Josefina MacGregor of Suma Urbana, a group of neighborhood associations in Mexico City, told the *Guardian*. "Facing pressure from citizens, the government will sometimes say that they are going to sanction the developers [for building violations]. But it's not true."

After the 1985 earthquake many residents abandoned Mexico City's center. But city government incentives led to massive development over the last decade. Despite warnings from civil engineers that tall new developments were shifting and drying out soil, increasing earthquake risks, and of massive construction projects weakening the foundations of neighboring buildings, such development in the city's center proceeded at a breakneck pace.

A reform after the 1985 earthquake required hiring a licensed "Director Responsible for Construction" (DRO in Spanish) to oversee meeting compliance with earthquake prevention requirements as to new building construction. DROs were routinely bribed. Yet in 2016, Mancera Espinosa's office suspended legislation that permitted city departments to sanction DROs.

The law required that the city conduct a review of the structures of schools, hospitals and housing built following the massive 8.1 September 7 Oaxaca earthquake, which was felt in Mexico City. None was performed.

Despite massive casualties and damage from the 1985 earthquake, during the ensuing three decades the entire Mexico City development regime served the interests of developers and their profits, not the safety of its residents. The results are there for all to see. Nothing the Mexican president or government officials say about preparedness and solidarity can paper over this naked reality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Thousands of construction violations