

7.5 magnitude earthquake leaves Peru's impoverished Amazonas in ruins

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A 7.5 magnitude earthquake has left a large part of the department of Amazonas, one of the poorest in Peru, in ruins.

According to the Peruvian Geophysical Institute, the earthquake occurred at 5:52 a.m. on November 28, and its waves extended throughout northern and central Peru, reaching the capital Lima, 1,125 km away by road, as well as the southern regions of Ecuador and Colombia.

Hours after the quake, the Lima daily *La República* said that in the department of Amazonas alone, “The tremor left 636 victims, 2,202 affected, 12 injured; as well as 117 houses destroyed, 110 uninhabitable and 408 houses affected.” One woman died apparently of a heart attack.

The updated Damage Assessment and Needs Analysis (EDAN) said that in the region 764 houses were affected, 375 left uninhabitable and 117 fully destroyed. “Three percent of the people do not have electricity.”

In addition, 32 health care facilities, eight public offices and 19 churches were damaged. Five other religious centers were destroyed. This is not counting the damage to the road infrastructure, which is enormous.

At the epicenter of the earthquake, “Six schools [were] affected, a health center and two temples destroyed,” the National Institute of Civil Defense (INDECI) reported.

Two days after the event, another newspaper, *El Comercio*, reported: “As of yesterday, the mortal victim of the earthquake was a three-year-old boy, who was crushed to death by some boards that fell due to the tremor.” It added that “more than 6,000 people were affected.”

“Other departments heavily affected were San Martin, Cajamarca and Loreto,” reported *El Comercio*. The figures for the neighboring departments were “Cajamarca with 170 victims, five houses destroyed, 30 uninhabitable houses; and San Martin with 143 victims, 33 uninhabitable houses, among others.”

Geophysics studies indicated that the threat was located behind Peru's mountain range. Specialists warned that not only is the coast threatened by seismic risk. According to the executive president of the Geophysical Institute of Peru (IGP), Hernando Tavera, earthquakes in the highlands and jungles of the country can have the same or even greater intensity than those occurring in the coastal area, despite the fact that the

collision of the Nazca and Continental plates occurs on the coast.

The tragedy could have been reduced to a minimum if it were not for the criminal policy of the central government, which abandons the regions furthest from the capital.

The lack of development of infrastructure in remote areas had a strong negative impact. Rock falls abounded on the highways. The main ones blocked roads linking Chachapoyas to Pedro Ruiz Gallo and Chachapoyas to Rodriguez de Mendoza.

Meanwhile, hundreds of inhabitants of the districts of Nieva, Chachapoyas and Chirinos have been cut off from communication after their roads were severely affected. According to COEN (Centro de Operaciones de Emergencia Nacional), as a result of the earthquake, 1.5 kilometers of road were totally destroyed, while 5.3 kilometers were damaged by falling rocks. “There are still landslides despite the fact that there are no more aftershocks,” an official of the institution told *La República* two days after the earthquake.

The statistics on the destruction caused by the earthquake appear less severe because it took place in a department with a very low population density, mainly dedicated to agricultural activities. With a little less than half a million inhabitants in a country of 33 million, it accounts for approximately 1.6 percent of the Peruvian population.

However, a comparison with what the same level of destruction would have meant for Lima is revealing. Assuming a similar infrastructure as the one in the department of Amazonas, for the 10 million inhabitants of metropolitan Lima, the figures would have been approximately 24 times higher, i.e., more than 52,000 affected and 13,000 homes destroyed, uninhabitable or affected.

President Pedro Castillo quickly flew by helicopter to the area and declared a state of emergency in five regions.

In the first 100 days of Castillo's government, he has given in to everything the national bourgeoisie has asked of him. He has restructured his cabinet by getting rid of anyone the bourgeoisie denounced as a “communist” or falsely accused of having had decades-old connections with the extinct Maoist guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path).

Following his hollow policy of “no more poor people in a rich country” in his visit to the Amazonas, the president

committed himself to the reconstruction of homes and assured that he will not rest “until the population has the security of being in their homes in peace.” This will likely prove to be more empty promises.

The total lack of fulfillment of his electoral promises has caused Castillo’s approval ratings to plummet. In the southern Andean departments, where in many places he won by a margin of up to 80 percent, the latest statistics from the Institute of Peruvian Studies (IEP) on October 31 showed that his approval ratings in the impoverished region, his main base of support, had fallen from 58 percent to 42 percent over the course of the previous month.

During his inspection of the affected areas, Castillo showed that political attacks, including over corruption and demands for his removal from office, are beginning to rattle him. When a reporter questioned him, “Are you considering resigning?” he rudely replied, “Are you crazy, sir?”

Humberto Campodonico, an engineering economist specializing in hydrocarbons, made a study on the economic situation of Amazonas in which he found that “In 2001, the Gross Added Value (not considering taxes) of Peru was 109 billion Peruvian soles in 1994, while Amazonas was only 713 million soles. This means that Amazonas accounts for 0.65 percent of Peru’s GVA. This same relationship was maintained until 2007, the last year with INEI statistics.”

He went on to explain, “In Amazonas, the predominant sector is agriculture, with 40 percent of GVA, but this figure for the average Peruvian is 10 percent of GVA. The difference is abysmal and revealing of economic backwardness. If we look at other services, manufacturing, commerce and construction, the distances from the rest of Peru are also notable.”

Campodonico added, “Poverty in Amazonas, according to the latest INEI Poverty Report, reaches 59.7 percent of the population, up from 55 percent in 2007. Thus, Amazonas became part of Group 2 of the poor regions of Peru along with Apurimac (69 percent), Ayacucho (64.8 percent), Pasco (64.3 percent), Puno (62.8 percent), Huanuco (61.5 percent), and Cusco (58.4 percent). Group 1 has only one member, Apurimac, with 82.1 percent poverty.”

Although it is recognized that mining and oil are not significant activities in the Amazonas department, the business daily *Gestión* warned, “Mining undermines the wealth of indigenous territories in the Amazon basin.”

Gestión continued, “According to a legal analysis carried out in Peru and five other countries that control more than 90 percent of the Amazon basin, “national laws and regulations tend to favor companies over Indigenous Peoples.”

Moreover, “The data also reveals that between 2000 and 2015, the indigenous lands where these activities are developed suffered a higher rate of deforestation.”

They also point out that in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru the loss of forest cover was at least three times higher in indigenous territories with mining operations, both legal and illegal, than in

the rest; and one to two times higher in Colombia and Venezuela.

The situation among the 333 native communities is most alarming. Communication between the indigenous communities was cut due to lack of roads and electricity. New dangers are also feared due to the beginning of the heavy rainy season in November in the Amazon, intensifying the problem of landslides and more communication interruptions.

The Amazon region was also hard hit by COVID-19, which has claimed over 200,000 lives across Peru, the country with the highest recorded mortality rate on the planet. The region also has the lowest vaccination rate in Peru. The threat of a new and even more devastating wave of the pandemic was underscored by the report Tuesday that Japanese authorities had detected the new and highly contagious Omicron variant in a traveler arriving from Peru.

The earthquake’s destruction of the indigenous people’s property, land and means of subsistence in the poor department of Amazonas can only increase the growing discontent of the Peruvian people with a government that has broken all its promises.

In June 2009 then President Alan Garcia—who a decade later would commit suicide, when police appeared at his house with a preventive arrest order for alleged crimes of corruption in his dealings with the Brazilian mega-construction company Odebrecht—mockingly told the indigenous communities that it was he who decided how the jungle would be divided up for exploration and exploitation by transnational oil companies. This was in violation of the international rights of indigenous peoples to decide on the sovereignty of their lands.

A failure by Castillo’s government to make reparations to the indigenous people affected by the earthquake may help ignite social conflicts between the indigenous people and transnational petroleum companies.

Reuters recently reported on PetroTal Corp. complaining that “indigenous people from an Amazon region in Peru were blocking its crude oil transport operations and could halt production in the coming days, in another conflict affecting the country’s natural resources industry.”

The news agency added that the Canadian-based oil company is sending its crude down the Amazon River by barge to Brazil for export “because the pipeline it normally uses—owned by state-owned Petroperú—has been paralyzed since the beginning of October due to another protest in the area.”



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