

1-15-2009

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Earthquake Hits Costa Rica Hard." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9670>

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Earthquake Hits Costa Rica Hard

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: Thursday, January 15, 2009

Death and damage assessments continued to rise for days after an earthquake shook Costa Rica to its roots Jan. 8. Measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale, the temblor caused houses and buildings to fall to rubble, landslides to bury all in their path and block highways, and people to be trapped in cut-off mountain communities. The US Geological Survey said the quake emanated from a point 32 km northwest of San Jose, near Poas Volcano National Park, at the relatively shallow depth of 6 km. The ground shook for about 40 seconds. The park is a tourist attraction. Some 300 visitors were trapped there when a landslide buried the road they had come in on. First to be reported dead were two local children selling candy to the tourists. They were killed in the slide, as was a third, when her house collapsed under cascading earth from the side of the volcano. The toll of dead and missing rose steadily as rescuers reached affected areas to probe, dig, and search. The quake was said to be among the strongest to hit the country in 150 years. As rescuers led survivors from the hard-hit areas, one survivor, Esteban Godoy, told reporters, "We passed places where cars were buried and it stank of bodies." Two days after the quake, rescuers were still working, but Red Cross spokesman Freddy Roman said chances of finding more survivors were diminishing. Finds of corpses continued. "We are working on removing corpses, taking picks and shovels on all-terrain vehicles to reach areas where people may be buried," said Comision Nacional de Emergencias (CNE) official Victor Falla. A state of emergency was declared for San Jose and its environs, including Cartago, Alajuela, and Heredia. Officials hurried to commission and deploy private helicopters to aid in relief efforts. Lacking an army, the country had no military equipment or personnel to contribute. Four-wheeler owners who usually use their vehicles for fun in impassible places also lent their equipment and expertise. They could be found transporting injured, trapped, or just stuck locals through the mud and debris. They transported Red Cross personnel and workers scrambling to get to where the damage was. Some 200 four-wheelers got together spontaneously on the Internet to offer this aid. "We all talk to each other on the Internet," said national four-wheeling champion Erick Francisco Zamorro, and they all agreed electronically to go and help. It was not all fun. Said four-wheeler Roberto Campos, "Many relatives asked us to go to their houses to see if the family was ok, but we couldn't even find the houses." President Oscar Arias led national mourning, noting, "Hundreds of families had seen serious damage to their homes." The mourning period was to last a week. Environmental damage was also rife. At Poas, near the epicenter, Rodrigo del Potro, a researcher at the Observatorio Vulcanologico y Sismologico de Costa Rica (OVSICORI), explained that, while a 6.2 magnitude is not all that big, "It's the proximity and the depth of the event that counts. Unfortunately it is in very steep terrain, so slopes failed in the acceleration of the earthquake. It was pristine forest and now it's gone because of the landslides." Also unfortunate is the tendency of volcanoes to become irritable when shaken from their slumber. Poas has erupted twice since scientists detected increased activity following the Jan. 8 quake and its numerous aftershocks. "It is possible that the earthquakes disturbed the hydrothermal system of Poas, but at the moment we can neither affirm nor deny that the eruptions are related to the temblors. These are typical events for Poas, and they occur sporadically," said volcanologist Maria del Mar Martinez. The last eruption was one year ago, in January 2008. The eruptions so far have been modest but inconvenient. The first, on Jan. 12, threw a column of sediment, sulfur, and water some 15 meters in the air. The

second occurred the next day, causing chief of Centro de Operaciones de Emergencia (COE) Arnold Alpizar to issue a warning to relief workers. "We have asked personnel to take security measures. In addition, many quakes are being reported on the site." Adding up the costs and looking for money Early government estimates, as of Jan. 13, are that material losses would be around US \$100 million. The still-inexact death toll was at 35, and several are still missing. Officials expect the number of deaths to rise slightly in coming days but the number of missing to decline. "If there are more people missing, their families will advise us," said CNE chief Daniel Gallardo. "It's unlikely that there are missing people that have still not been reported." Some people who had been listed as missing turned up as government people found them in the many shelters housing hundreds of people. About 600 houses are known destroyed, and some 128,000 have been affected in some way. The declaration of national emergency will make funds available to coordinate ongoing relief activities. The government is seeking World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) financing. Finance Minister Guillermo Zuniga is charged with expediting the flow of these funds, a reported US\$65 million in loans from the World Bank and US\$850 million from the IDB. But Oscar Nunez, delegation chief for the ruling Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLC), said the agonizingly slow legislative process will delay the funds. At best, he said, the legislation would take a week, despite the house having voted unanimously on Jan. 13 to dispense with the paperwork. Even in the face of grave need, there is no getting around the obligation to first publish the bill in the official paper *La Gaceta*, then have it voted upon twice, and then sent to the executive for the signatures of the president and Treasury Minister Guillermo Zuniga. President Arias has also put out a call for international aid through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and has thanked countries that have in one way or another come to the rescue. Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno acknowledged, "The support that has arrived in the country, and more that has been announced, by different governments is invaluable and opportune and permits bringing a message of encouragement to the afflicted." Contributing countries so far have included the US, China, Venezuela, and Colombia. Until Costa Rica's recent passage of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the insurance industry was a national monopoly. For that reason, insurance-claims information was readily available. The Instituto Nacional de Seguros (INS) reported 488 claims for damage to housing and 72 to commercial and industrial properties. Serious destruction to infrastructure includes the Cariblanco hydroelectric dam. A property of the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), the facility is expected to be out of service for as long as a year while a new control center is built to replace the one completely buried in mud when a wave generated by the quake topped a protective dike. All the turbines are said to be lost. INS president Guillermo Constenla said the facility is covered for earthquake and related costs of being out of operation for US\$131 million. These costs were not included in previous government estimates of damage. It is expected that additional claims will come in for other hydroelectric plants known to be damaged, including the Toro I and II operations, and Don Pedro and El Angel. On Toro III, all work has been stopped and workers evacuated from construction of a 3-km tunnel that was to bring water from the dam to turn the generators. Some workers were injured, leaving the excavation when power to drainage pumps failed and the tunnel filled with water. They had just 10 meters to go to finish the project. The privately owned Suerkata dam in Alajuela has filed claims for structural damage. Constenla did not say what the total bill would be or what the cost of the various outages would amount to, but he did say that the INS has sufficient resources to pay its obligations. At year-end, the INS reported US\$1.419 billion in assets and about US\$420 million in equity. Early estimates of these losses are expected by the end of January, say reports. Engineers from the institute have already been dispatched to make the assessments. Physical damage will, in certain instances, affect

policy. The damage to school infrastructure is an example. The total damage to the education system's physical plant is as yet unknown, but it is obvious that the schools in Fraijanes, Poasito, Carrizal, San Isidro, Vara Blanca, El Angel, and Cinchon are somewhere between unserviceable and entirely destroyed. The educational system is a policy priority for this administration, as President Arias demonstrated in a tour of conditions in these locations with Education Minister Leonardo Garnier. The earthquake happened during school vacations classes are scheduled to resume Feb. 16. This hiatus prevented many deaths and injuries to children and also affords time for rebuilding and repair that could return students to their studies. Garnier said he thinks schools can open on time, but that assumes that the displaced populations return to their homes, a less certain surmise at this point. Some locales may not be suitable for rebuilding. The curriculum is also subject to change. Garnier said teachers will have to depart from the traditional format to help shaken kids confront their new reality. Communities have already begun to manifest collective panic as aftershocks continue. This has been seen particularly at the worst hit sites. While not of the intensity to repeat the damage, the shocks are sufficient to stir anxiety. On Jan. 13 and 14, successive shocks registered above four on the scale. At least one person is reported to have died as a result of a panic attack. In Bajos del Toro, entire families are leaving their communities, and others have said they would follow, to avoid being in a congested area or inside a house that could collapse.

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