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Guatemala in Aftermath of November Earthquake

by Louisa Reynolds

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"Daddy, I’m going with you," insisted Edgar holding onto his father’s leg. Since the school holidays had begun, the boy was adamant in accompanying his father, Mario Ramírez, to work. Although he was only six years old, he felt he was already a man and he did not belong at home with his mother, grandmother, brothers, and sisters.

Mario Ramírez finally gave in to his son’s insistence. On Wednesday at dawn, they left home, walked down to the sandpit, and Edgar watched fascinated as his father picked up a shovel and began to dig out the sand that would be sold to local construction companies. Not content with watching him from a distance, he was determined to follow him to the bottom of the steep ravine so as not to miss any of the action.

But suddenly, at 10:38 a.m., the earth began to shake and the piles of lose earth around them began to collapse. Mario Ramírez grabbed his son and ran but it was too late. Five of the six men who worked in the sandpit, as well as young Edgar, were buried under tons of earth, and only a laborer who was in charge of grinding stones and was suspended from a cable when the earthquake occurred managed to save himself. Among the victims was 73-year-old Cruz Abel de León, who had owned the sandpit for almost fifty years.

The fire brigade soon arrived at the sandpit in the village of El Recreo, five minutes away from the department capital of San Marcos, a northern department close to the Mexican border. Rescue workers brought an excavator and, during the course of the afternoon, managed to pull out four bodies including those of Edgar and his father. On several occasions, they were almost buried by a fresh avalanche of sand as a wave of aftershocks was felt in the area, but they did not call off the search until nightfall.

The following morning, they returned and managed to pull out two more bodies. However, the body of 21-year-old Wilfredo Andiano Fuentes was missing. His mother, Gomercinda Fuentes, a woman who was barely 50 years old but had already lost her teeth, watched with growing anguish as the team of rescue workers dug deeper and deeper into the ravine in the hope of spotting a hand, a foot, or a piece of clothing sticking out from the sand.

After the earthquake had opened huge cracks in the walls of her home, Gomercinda Fuentes began to call all her family members to make sure that they were OK. When her daughter-in-law told her tearfully that the sandpit had collapsed she rushed to the scene. But 48 hours after the earthquake, her son was still missing.

Meanwhile, in the Catholic church, a rustic building with a unpaved floors and a tin roof, family members and friends walked solemnly in a line and with their heads bowed, past a row of four coffins: three large ones and a small white one, which contained the tiny body of Edgar Ramírez.

"They had gone to work, there was no other job for them in this village," said María Cristina Orozco, Mario Ramírez’s mother and Edgar’s grandmother. The tiny two-bedroom house that she shared...
with six other family members could collapse any minute, but she still didn’t know where she would move to until the aid promised by the government arrived.

In the urban center of San Marcos, most houses had huge cracks and there were piles of rubble in the streets. The oldest buildings and the houses made from adobe had suffered the worst damage. Two days after the earthquake, the electricity supply was up and running again, but the population lacked potable water since pipes had burst as a result of the earthquake. There were also isolated reports of price hikes in local shops and buses.

In the village of San Rafael Soche, the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reducción de los Desastres (CONRED), a government agency in charge of evacuating people and distributing humanitarian aid in the aftermath of a natural disaster, had turned the community hall into a shelter for those whose homes had collapsed during the earthquake. However, two days after the quake, the shelter remained empty, since many people refused to leave their homes fearing that they could be looted and preferred to risk staying at home, with a neighbor or family member who lived nearby, or to sleep in the street close to their homes.

During the first days after the earthquake, CONRED reported that 762 people were sleeping in the 20 shelters set up by the agency in the departments of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango. However, by Nov. 26, the figure had risen to 7,224.

The earthquake and its toll

The laborers who died in the sandpit are among the 44 people killed during the magnitude 7.2 earthquake that occurred on Nov. 7. Although President Otto Pérez Molina promised a swift and efficient reconstruction operation, aid has slowly trickled through to San Marcos’ impoverished communities.

CONRED says that 33,951 people had to be evacuated after the earthquake, 32,797 homes and 286 schools were damaged, and 11 schools were destroyed.

San Marcos, the department that suffered the highest death toll and most of the material damage from the earthquake, has 995,000 inhabitants; 75% of the population lives in rural areas, and 36% belongs to the Mayan Mam and Sipakapense ethnic groups. Sixty-six percent of the population lives below the poverty line (46% in poverty and 20% in extreme poverty).

"Most of the affected families have still not received basic humanitarian aid. Although statistics regarding the extent of the damage have started to flow, assessing the extent of the damage is still a challenge that has made it difficult to understand the scale of the disaster," reads a report issued by the humanitarian nongovernmental organization Oxfam in December.