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Massive Earthquake Pounds Region South of Peruvian Capital

by LADB Staff
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A severe 8.0-magnitude earthquake rocked the coastal area of southern Peru on Aug. 15, killing at least 540 people and leaving about 80,000 Peruvians homeless. The cities of Pisco and Ica were badly hit, along with the surrounding regions along a 130-km stretch of the Pacific coast. Casualty numbers could have been massive if Lima where a huge portion of the country's population lives had been more directly shaken. Aid delivery to survivors was reported to be haphazard and inadequate, even as there was an initial surge of international promises of aid to the region.

Some groups allege that the government had underestimated the amount of damage, as it set up an authority to manage reconstruction. Economic forecasters say that the nation's GDP could drop by as much as half a percentage point because of the quake. Cities of Pisco and Ica devastated, Lima not hit as badly. The earthquake leveled most of Pisco, a port city 200 km southeast of Lima, injuring more than 1,500 people and destroying 40,000 homes. At least 40 other people remained missing in addition to the documented dead, said Alberto Visual, a director in Peru's civil defense agency.

On the day after the quake, dust-covered corpses were pulled out of the ruins and laid in rows in the streets or beneath bloodstained sheets at damaged hospitals and morgues. Doctors struggled to help the injured, including hundreds who waited on cots in the open air, fearing more aftershocks would send the structures crashing down. Pisco's mayor said at least 200 people were buried in the rubble of a church where they were attending a service. Some 17 others died inside a church in Ica, the Canal N cable news station said.

The historic Senor de Luren church was among several heavily damaged in Ica, where at least 57 bodies were taken to the morgue. Reports said Ica was nearly completely leveled. Services were packed when the quake struck at 6:40 p.m. because Aug. 15 is celebrated by Roman Catholics as the Feast of the Assumption, the day the Virgin Mary was taken up to heaven. "The dead are scattered by the dozens on the streets," Pisco mayor Juan Mendoza told Lima radio station CPN, sobbing. "We don't have lights, water, communications. Most houses have fallen. Churches, stores, hotels everything is destroyed."

The earthquake's magnitude was raised from 7.9 to 8 on Aug. 16 by the US Geological Survey (USGS). At least 14 aftershocks of magnitude 5 or greater followed. The tremors caused renewed anxiety, though there were no reports of additional damage or injuries.

In Chincha, a small town near Pisco only 40 km from the quake's epicenter, an AP Television News cameraperson counted 30 bodies in a hospital patio. "Our services are saturated and half of the hospital has collapsed," Dr. Huber Malma said as he single-handedly attended to dozens of patients. The quake toppled a wall in Chincha's prison, allowing at least 600 prisoners to flee. Only 29 had been recaptured, national prisons official Manuel Aguilar said. Overstretched police and rescue
workers in orange uniforms sought to help survivors trying to get some sleep in the streets amid collapsed adobe homes. "We're all frightened to return to our houses," Maria Cortez said, staring vacantly at the half of her house that was still standing.

The Peruvian Red Cross arrived in Ica and Pisco 7 1/2 hours after the initial quake, about three times as long as it would normally have taken because of road damage, Red Cross official Giorgio Ferrario said. In Lima, 153 km from the epicenter, only one death was recorded. But the furious two minutes of shaking prompted thousands to flee into the streets and sleep in public parks. "The earth moved differently this time. It made waves, and the earth was like jelly," said Antony Falconi, 27, trying to find a bus to take him home.

**A 'megathrust' earthquake**

Scientists said the quake was a "megathrust," a type of earthquake similar to the catastrophic Indian Ocean temblor in 2004 that generated deadly tsunami waves. "Megathrusts produce the largest earthquakes on the planet," said USGS geophysicist Paul Earle. The quake caused a tsunami as well, but scientists expected surges of no more than 1.6 feet in faraway Japan. The last time a quake of magnitude 7.0 or larger struck Peru was in September 2005, when a 7.5-magnitude earthquake rocked the country's northern jungle, killing four people.

In 2001, a 7.9-magnitude quake struck near the southern Andean city of Arequipa, killing 71.

Refugees struggle to get aid Relief officials urgently appealed for more aid for earthquake survivors along Peru's shattered southern coast two weeks after the catastrophe. Medical help, blankets, and tents topped the list, along with food, water, and latrines.

On Aug. 30 survivors were still huddling in cardboard shelters in desperate, unhygienic conditions, said Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, MSF) spokesman Francois Dumont, speaking from the town of Guadeloupe. "We found the town completely destroyed," Dumont told the Associated Press. "In makeshift shelters made of cardboard and bed sheets in front of their destroyed houses, families are living in cold and unhygienic conditions. They have no latrines, no drinking water, and no real space to bathe." "It's like one day after the quake," added Dumont, whose group has 35 people operating mobile clinics and offering psychological counseling in the disaster zone.

Despite substantial help early on from Latin America, Europe, Japan, and the US, some 200,000 people still needed help to save their lives, said Elisabeth Byrs, spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which appealed for US$37 million more in donations. The town of Cabeza del Toro is one of many where survivors are in dire need of help, said Mar Mora, an adviser to the UN World Food Program (WFP). "All the houses are completely down, many of them broken, or many of them have disappeared. There are problems with water as well. They have not received absolutely anything until now and they are requesting medical services, tents, food, and special assistance for children."

The quake also badly damaged at least 173 churches, monuments, and historic buildings, with about one-third completely destroyed, said the director of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INC) Cecilia Bakula.
Experts say it could have been much worse if the quake had struck closer to Lima, a metropolis of 8 million inhabitants where many homes are built of adobe on sandy soil, just like the ones that crumbled in Pisco. Many of Lima's adobe buildings are five stories tall, with walls reinforced with nothing more than "quincha," thick reeds mixed with mud. Brick construction is particularly vulnerable to seismic collapse.

The Peruvian government estimates the cost of rebuilding these coastal towns to be US$220 million. Other estimates run much higher. President Alan Garcia also has promised financial aid and jobs to quake survivors. Garcia said help was reaching 95% of victims. The week after the quake, he noted that electricity had been restored to 90% of the city of Ica and 60% of Chincha. But UN officials blamed poor organization and coordination for a patchwork aid response, especially in rural areas.

Trucks carrying aid had been spotted far from the disaster zone, raising fears of stolen donations, according to local media reports. Hundreds of children and their mothers, their hair encrusted with the dust from the quake, waited along the Pan-American Highway, some holding Peruvian flags, begging passing cars for aid, reported Latinamerica Press on Sept. 5. "It was impressive to see people living in the mountains, in small tents, under which were 10, 15 or 20 people," said Dumont.

Medical officials also say that the psychological effects of the quake are devastating. Homeless victims dug through the ruins of their home for shoes belonging to their loved ones, photographs, something to remind them that they once had a normal and happy life.

In the San Clemente neighborhood outside Pisco, some 30 people huddled around each other, trying to keep warm. They had barely received enough water to drink, let alone food. "We've lost everything, and it doesn't seem to matter to anyone," said Clara Rosales, whose husband, mother, and father were crushed in the rubble of their adobe home in Guadalupe. "They want us to leave the little we have to walk 5, 10 kilometers [to find aid], and that we're not going to do. There are robberies, looting here."

"A wall fell on my back, and I haven't received help from anyone, but I have to cook for my daughter and my husband," said Maria Delgado, whose home was looted. Local media reported that some homeless resorted to eating cats to survive. "We were surprised by the absence of adult cats in our inspections in the city [of Pisco], and we only found kittens," Shari Artadi, a representative of the Canadian Animal Assistance Team in Pisco, told CPN radio. "Some victims told us that they had no other option but to sacrifice their pets to fight the hunger and lack of food in the first days after the earthquake."

**Government sets up regional rebuilding authority**

Federal lawmakers created a rebuilding fund on Aug. 28, calling it the Fondo de Reconstruccion del Sur (FORSUR). But politicians feuded regarding the relief effort, with the president of the department of Ica, Romulo Triveno, creating a parallel fund and blasting the central government's effort as a violation of regional autonomy, saying the fund would contradict the ongoing effort to decentralize government operations in Peru.
Garcia appointed a group of businesspeople to lead FORSUR, which will coordinate public and private rebuilding efforts. The government's initial pledge was some US$31 million, and international institutions and governments have promised another US$40 million. "What we want is to start building within a month," Julio Favre, the head of FORSUR, told the press after his first meeting with Garcia on Aug. 28.

The government declared a state of emergency in Ica, Lima's Canete province, and Catrovirreyna in the highland department of Huancavelica because of the damage. The tensions subsided somewhat after regional presidents agreed to sit on the FORSUR board, but mayors from 23 towns hit by the earthquake published an open letter explaining their position. "FORSUR is an agency opposed to decentralization as a policy for the democratic organization of the state," read their Sept. 1 communique. Papers like Lima's El Comercio criticized the regional politicians for putting their own interests above those of the quake victims.

Critics say the government could be setting itself up for huge problems by underestimating reconstruction costs, creating unrealistic hopes among victims in Pisco, the hardest hit city, and nearby towns. The Lima Chamber of Commerce reported that cleanup and reconstruction of urban and rural areas would cost around US$450 million, more than twice the government estimate. The country's engineering society puts the price tag close to US$600 million, and some relief agencies say the number is likely to approach the US$1-billion mark.

Calculations based on government claims show that the initial amount is far too low. The administration has promised to hire 8,000 victims for cleanup and reconstruction crews, paying about US$4.40 per day, or US$35,555 a day total. Families who lost homes will also get some US $1,900 to rebuild. This amounts to more than US$76 million if the number of homes destroyed stays at 40,035, the most recent estimate of the Instituto Nacional de Defensa Civil (Indeci). Schools, daycare centers 90 of the 91 daycare centers in Pisco collapsed hospitals, prisons, museums, and productive infrastructure need to be rebuilt.

Economy Minister Luis Carranza said at least US$60 million will be spent on rebuilding and repairing schools. While electricity and water services have been restored and the Pan-American Highway reopened after segments were fixed, the solutions are temporary and costly, long-term solutions are needed. Regional economy smashed, national economy set back slightly Estimates from the private sector have yet to be calculated, but the agroexport, fishing, garment, and wine industries will be affected.

Production Minister Rafael Rey said that the earthquake will lower Ica's GDP by around 6%, while shaving about 0.5% off the national total. GDP growth for the year is now estimated at 7.2%. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted a "small" GDP drop of between 0.3% and 0.5%. Other analysts foresaw a drop of as much as 1.0%.

While the country has been undergoing an agroexport boom, the region will no longer be able to participate in it. The tourism that the region depends on in the Paracas-Ica-Nazca-Chincha corridor, where ancient monuments and ruins like the famed Nazca Lines and the well-known rock formation
called The Cathedral in the Paracas National Reserve draw in thousands of tourists annually, will also be badly hampered.

Walter Martinez, general manager of the country's fourth-largest fishing company Hayduk, estimates that damage to fishmeal and canning plants in Pisco and nearby Tambo de Mora could run around US$30 million. There are 17 fishmeal plants and 11 canning and freezing plants in Ica department. In addition to the damage for factories and farms, Rey said the crisis facing workers left homeless is also affecting industry. "The principal problem is that workers are unable to be on the job, having to take care of their homes and families," he said.

Garcia and his ministers are hoping for a huge push from the private sector they believe is eager to invest. One of the first projects will be privatizing the port in Pisco, which was all but leveled by the earthquake and an immediate sea surge. The goal is to have it in private company hands by early 2008.

Pisco, home to the plant that processes liquids from the Camisea gas fields, is also looking like the primary option for companies interested in using natural gas to create a petrochemical industry. Around 12 companies are interested and initial projections are of investments topping US$1 billion to build a complex to produce fertilizers (urea and ammonia).

The construction drive will spur demand for cement, bricks, and steel, offsetting a drop in asparagus harvests for lack of water and access to markets, said Hugo Perea, chief analyst at Banco BBVA Continental in Lima. Peru is the world's largest asparagus exporter. "This will boost construction as the government has money to spend," Perea said in a phone interview. "There won't be any major negative impact on Peru's economic growth this year."

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