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## Mexico City Observes 30th Anniversary of Devastating Earthquake

by Carlos Navarro

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Thirty years have transpired since a devastating earthquake caused severe damage to many neighborhoods in Mexico City. The temblor on Sept. 19, 1985, which measured 8.1 on the Richter scale, leveled hundreds of buildings in the capital and claimed thousands of lives. The disaster not only caused material damage to the capital but the psychological impact of the event continues to this day, and the political shift that occurred in the aftermath of the quake has helped shape the Mexican capital during the past three decades. Observers point to some positive changes that came following the earthquake, including an improvement in the building codes. There have also been demographic changes, including a shift in the neighborhoods of the capital.

Earthquakes are common in Mexico, with nearly 6,000 temblors registered in Mexico between Jan. 1 and July 28, 2015, according to the Coordinación Estatal de Protección Civil de Oaxaca (CEPCO). This is on par with estimates from the Mexican insurance industry, which reported nearly 7,600 earthquakes in 2014. However, few quakes have had the same impact as the one that struck Mexico City in September 1985.

Even though the epicenter of the earthquake was in Michoacán, the temblor, which lasted 90 seconds, caused its most significant damage in Mexico City. A second quake, measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale, occurred the next day on Sept. 20.

"The intensities of the seismic wave varied throughout the city. It started off with a minor tremor and then intensified within a matter of seconds. The wave then calmed down as if it was going to stop, but suddenly increased its oscillations once again which remained for 90 seconds. The colonias most badly damaged were Tlatelolco, Centro, Doctores, Roma and Obrera," said the online news site Mexico City Vibes.

"The earthquake left the nation's capital with a new face," the daily newspaper Excélsior said in a report on Sept. 18. "At least 30,000 buildings were totally destroyed, and in some areas public squares were constructed to remember more than 10,000 victims."

### *Population shifts*

One of the effects of the earthquake has been a population shift. The federal statistics agency (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) says the neighborhoods in the center of the city that felt the greatest impact of the temblor have lost about 33% of their population in the past three decades, going from 2.5 million inhabitants in 1980 to 1.7 million in 2010.

"The instability of the subsoil and the lack of accessible homes in boroughs like Cuauhtémoc, Benito Juárez, Miguel Hidalgo, and Venustiano Carranza are factors behind the migration," said the daily newspaper Reforma, citing information from specialists.

While those interior sections of Mexico City lost residents, other communities in the outskirts of the city, some of which were semi-rural 30 years ago, gained new residents. INEGI data says the

communities of Cuajimalpa, Milpa Alta, Tláhuac, Tlalpan, and Xochimilco have experienced an average population increase of about 48%, going from 878,000 inhabitants in 1980 to 1.7 million residents in 2010.

Researchers say the impact of the earthquake was so strong in Mexico City because the capital was built on a lakebed. "The lake occupied the lowest area of the basin, an area that is enclosed," said scientist Cinna Lomnitz, researcher emeritus at the Instituto de Geofísica, which is associated with the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

Lomnitz said the boundaries of the lake included the center of Mexico City, which was most vulnerable to seismic activity. This area is known as Zone III. "The highest sections of Zone III, a neighborhood known as Lomas, did not have any buildings collapse," the scientist told Reforma. "There were also no buildings that collapsed in Zone I and Zone II."

A positive development resulting from the earthquake was the improvement in building codes, even in the areas most vulnerable to seismic activity. After the 1985 earthquake, scientists and engineers started to study the role of subsoil in the collapse of buildings. That knowledge, along with the use of better technologies and materials, has greatly reduced the potential for the type of devastation that the Mexican capital experienced 30 years ago. "There is very little probability that an earthquake of the same high intensity as the one in 1985 would cause the same type of damage," structural engineer David Serur said in an interview with Reforma. "There is no doubt that some damage will occur, but not as dramatic as 30 years ago."

The 1985 earthquake prompted federal and municipal authorities to conduct periodic emergency drills through the years. This year's drill was especially significant because of the 30th anniversary of the quake, but the preparations are similar to previous years. Two days before the actual drill, announcements were made on more than 8,000 loudspeakers installed in 16 boroughs around the capital. The Mexico City government also used its Twitter account to announce the events related to the drill.

At a ceremony to present an annual award on civil protection, President Enrique Peña Nieto reminded the population of the capital to remain alert about the possibility of another earthquake. However, the president also noted that Mexico is more prepared now to confront natural disasters with increased prevention and extensive campaigns to keep the population informed.

### *Few residents have earthquake insurance*

Even though authorities conduct the drills at least annually, some observers note some surprising trends in the reaction of the population of the capital to the devastation 30 years ago. For example, only a very tiny percentage of the population has acquired the types of insurance that go along with earthquake protection. Insurance adjustors say this is a nationwide trend in a country that is susceptible to seismic activity.

While exact statistics for the capital were not immediately available, insurance officials said only 5% of the homes in the entire country have protection against direct damage caused by an earthquake, a slight improvement from the 3% rate before the 1985 temblor. One-fourth of the residents who have insurance for property damage have coverage only on their mortgage debt.

"These are the principal situations that we as an insurance sector have to confront," Arturo González Briseño of Axa Seguros told the official news service Notimex. "We have to work every

day to inform society that we experienced a devastating incident 30 years ago and that we are not exempt from facing the same situation again."

Luis Álvarez, director of the Asociación de Instituciones de Seguros (AMIS), said the insurance industry paid out about US\$254 million to policyholders after the 1985 disaster. Of the buildings that were damaged, 7,000 units were insured and another 13,000 to 14,000 lacked coverage.

If an earthquake were to occur today, the cost would rise to US\$35 billion, but the industry would be able to cover the cost. "We do have a mechanism to ensure solvency and avoid bankruptcy for the sector," Álvarez noted.

Others wondered why the earthquake, which left such a scar on the residents of the capital, had not been portrayed in the arts and literature in Mexico, particularly the motion picture and the publishing industries. "If there was an event that affected the economic, political, and cultural base of the Mexican nation, it was the earthquake of 1985," said the daily newspaper business *El Financiero*. "Nevertheless, there are no movies or novels that narrate the pain and horror that millions of residents of Mexico City experienced."

"All the major events of the 20th century generated narratives in the movies and in literature. The Mexican Revolution, for example, attracted a wave of writings, including the [masterpiece] novel *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo," said *El Financiero*. "But there is no movie of that great quake of 8.1 on the Richter scale, and much less a novel."

"We lack a distanced interpretation of the tragedy," writer Eduardo Bautista, author of the book *Arte y olvido del terremoto*, told *El Financiero*. "Art, as opposed to journalism, is not only a better venue, but a necessary medium for a society to share its collective traumatic experiences."

### *Lingering psychological damage*

For some, the psychological impact of the earthquake lingers even after three decades. "What happened that day was very painful. I find it very difficult to describe, even for a person who writes four columns week," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote in *Excelsior* on Sept. 17, two days before the 30th anniversary of the disaster. "I am very aware of the trauma that this earthquake caused me. To this day, I remember the sense of fear. On this day, the residents of the capital felt deeply and personally the fragility of human life. Death ceased to be a question of theory and became a part of reality."

"An even more complex task is to estimate the enormous, unmeasurable human cost of the tragedy," columnist Gabriel Guerra wrote in the daily newspaper *El Universal*. "In the absence of accurate official figures, the most optimistic estimates are that 10,000 people lost their lives. Others speak of 40,000 deaths. These figures do not take into account the many people who suffered physical and mental injuries, which they have had to carry with them the rest of their lives."

"Those whose were amputees, mutilated, disfigured provide the most visible evidence [of the earthquake], but there are countless victims who had to face the trauma in silence. They have suffered depression, panic, and other injuries to their psyche," added Guerra.

Guerra pointed to another effect of the earthquake, which was political. The slow and inadequate response of President Miguel de la Madrid's administration to the victims of the earthquake tarnished the reputation of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the eyes of

the citizens of the capital ([SourceMex, Sept. 21, 2005](#), and [July 8, 2009](#)). The PRI governed the capital for about a decade after the earthquake because at that time the mayor of the capital was appointed by the federal government. In 1997, electoral reforms gave the citizens of the capital the right to vote for the mayor ([SourceMex, June 5, 1996](#)), and voters have shunned the PRI candidate in favor of the representative of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in every election since then.

"There was an awakening of the citizens and civil society, who responded to the inability of the regime in power to confront materially and politically a disaster of this magnitude," said Guerra. "Thus was created a new generation of Mexicans [in the capital]."

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