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## **Powerful Earthquake Inflicts Severe Damage to Southern Mexico**

*by Carlos Navarro*

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The most powerful earthquake to hit Mexico in 100 years brought major devastation to states in the south, particularly communities in Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Tabasco states. The magnitude of the quake was measured at 8.2 on the Richter scale, marginally stronger than the temblor that leveled a big part of Mexico City in September 1985 ([SourceMex, Sept. 21, 2005](#), and [Sept. 23, 2015](#)).

The most recent earthquake, which took place overnight on Sept. 7, was felt as far north as Mexico City and surrounding states, but little damage occurred in the capital or the neighboring states of México, Puebla, Morelos, Hidalgo, and Tlaxcala. The quake was strong enough to cause buildings to sway violently in the Mexican capital, but the damage was minor, and no casualties were reported in the area.

“Saldo blanco,” Pedro Berruecos, an aide to Puebla Mayor Luis Banck Serrato, told the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB). Banck had been in Albuquerque for a conference of US and Mexican mayors, but returned to Mexico to deal with the aftermath of the quake and the possibility of damage from Hurricane Katia, which dumped significant rain in neighboring Veracruz.

Still, officials in central Mexico warned residents to prepare for aftershocks. “Authorities and [Puebla Gov. Antonio Gali] are emphasizing the importance of reporting any problems through 9-1-1, which would give officials a chance for a rapid response,” Puebla Auditor David Villanueva told LADB. “We are also instructing the citizens on what actions to take in the case of an aftershock.” Several hundred aftershocks were reported in various areas of Mexico in the four days that followed the quake.

In a piece published in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*, columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez drew some contrasts between the 1985 quake and the one that occurred last week. “To the surprise of all the residents of Mexico City, the capital escaped almost unscathed,” he wrote. “Not a single life was lost. There were damages, but almost none that were beyond repair.”

According to Fernández Menéndez, one consequence of the 1985 quake was that building codes were improved significantly. “People could ascertain that in 32 years, the city had changed, that the construction guidelines had been improved, and that the capacity of a large metropolitan area to resist an earthquake so strong was similar to that of cities like Tokyo or Los Angeles,” he wrote.

### ***Devastation reported in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco***

The most significant losses of property and life occurred near the epicenter of the earthquake, which was in the Pacific Ocean, 164 km (102 miles) west of Tapachula, in the state of Chiapas. According to scientists, the quake occurred near the point of collision between three tectonic plates, the Cocos, the Caribbean, and the North American.

Authorities said the quake resulted in at least 95 deaths, with a large number of the victims buried under collapsed buildings.

The most significant damage was reported in Juchitán de Zaragoza, a city in Oaxaca state with a population of more than 74,000 people. "The city is practically in ruins, from the center of the city, where the side of a historic government structure that is more than 100 years old [crumbled], to neighborhoods, where houses have collapsed," said the online news site E-Consulta.

The historic Iglesia San Vicente Ferrer was among the structures that sustained damage in Juchitán de Zaragoza. Several historic structures elsewhere in Oaxaca were also damaged, including the Templo de San Sebastián in the community of Tutla, and the Teatro Macedonio Alcalá and the Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción in the city of Oaxaca.

The earthquake also damaged PEMEX infrastructure near Salina Cruz, causing a spill that contaminated the water near the popular tourist destination Playa Brasil and also the area near the fishing communities of Salinas del Marqués. "The fishers and divers who were collecting oysters noted that the spill became apparent on Friday morning, just after the quake that occurred on Thursday," said Anselmo López Villalobos, president of the local fishing union (Unión de Productores y Organizaciones de la Industria Pesquera de Oaxaca).

According to Oaxaca Gov. Alejandro Murat, preliminary reports indicate that at least 12,000 homes sustained damage from the quake, but the total is expected to rise. The earthquake also resulted in at least 76 deaths in Oaxaca.

"We are united in facing this humanitarian crisis," Murat told reporters.

At least 1 million people in Oaxaca were in need of food, water, electricity, and help to rebuild damaged homes. "We are sending assistance from the federal government in Mexico City and from municipal authorities in the Mexican capital, which will allow us to increase assistance," said Rosario Robles, head of the ministry in charge of agrarian, land, and urban development ministry (Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial y Urbano, SEDATU).

The state of Chiapas, which was closer to the epicenter, suffered considerable damage as well. According to initial estimates, 1.5 million people were affected by the quake, with at least 40,000 homes in dire need of repairs. The greatest damage was reported in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and the communities of Villaflora, Pijijiapan, and Jiquipilas.

Three of the four deaths initially reported in Chiapas occurred in San Cristóbal de las Casas, including two women who died when a house and a wall collapsed. Chiapas Gov. Manuel Velasco also reported damage to hospitals that have lost energy.

The earthquake also caused some damage in Tabasco state, including to the high-rise Torre Zafiro in the city of Villahermosa and to four hospitals. Authorities said that schools in the state had sustained the most damage, the daily newspaper Tabasco Hoy reported.

The number of casualties in Tabasco was small when compared with Chiapas and Oaxaca. According to Gov. Arturo Núñez, the quake claimed four victims, including two minors. One child died when a wall collapsed, and an infant died in a children's hospital when the facility lost electricity, cutting off the ventilator.

Analysts noted that Oaxaca and Chiapas are two of the poorest states in Mexico.

"The states are going to require a transformation similar to the one that occurred in Mexico City and other parts of the country 32 years ago," Fernández Menéndez wrote in *Excélsior*. "There is a

need for this tragedy to become a catalyst for certainty and development for tomorrow. It's no use to conduct reconstruction based on models of the past. It must be done with the use of new paradigms and a vision to transform the least developed spaces of our country."

### *Government redirects Texas aid to quake victims*

Because of the magnitude of the damage caused by the earthquake, and to a smaller extent by Hurricane Katia, President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration had to rescind its offer to assist with US recovery efforts in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, which caused major flooding in Houston, southeast Texas, and parts of southwest Louisiana at the end of August ([SourceMex, Sept. 6, 2017](#)).

"Regrettably, at this moment we find it impossible to meet our commitment to provide the assistance that we had promised to Texas and the US federal government," the foreign relations ministry (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, SRE) said in a statement.

According to the SRE, the resources that had been gathered to send to Texas instead will be used in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, and other states affected by the quake and the hurricane. "We make this decision with the understanding that conditions have changed in both countries, and that the needs in Texas have fortunately diminished," it said.

No estimates have been released on the cost of recovery, partly because the damage has not fully been assessed. The earthquake that rocked Mexico City and surrounding areas in 1985 is said to have cost about US\$5 billion, or the equivalent of 2% of Mexico's GDP, according to Geo-Mexico.com.

In addition to the federal government, state and local authorities throughout Mexico are making plans to provide assistance to the affected states. The governors' association (Conferencia Nacional de Gobernadores, CONAGO) urged all the members who are able to do so to come to the aid of communities affected by the quake.

"A lot of people are suffering, and we are well aware of that fact," said CONAGO president Miguel Ángel Mancera, who is also the head of state of Mexico City (CDMX). "We are responding in solidarity."

Municipal authorities have also heeded the call to assist wherever possible, whether individually or through their own organization, the Asociación Nacional de Alcaldes (ANAC).

"We are a people who are inclined toward solidarity," David Cuauhtémoc Galindo, mayor of Nogales, Sonora, said in an interview with LADB. "When a situation occurs, we find a way to help according to our capabilities."

According to Galindo, he was approached by groups in Texas to help with the Harvey recovery. "We are always willing to help anyone in any location that is geographically near to us," said the mayor. "We never know when we are the ones who will need assistance."

Tijuana Mayor Juan Manuel Gastélum Buenrostro said he was not certain whether ANAC would mobilize its members. He pointed out, however, that his city has served as a support for the people affected by Tropical Storm Lidia, which caused major damage to the resort communities of Los Cabos and Cabos San Lucas in Baja California Sur state at the beginning of September. "Our city has become a collection point for items needed by the victims in Baja California Sur," he said.

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