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Latest Mexico City Earthquake Occurs Exactly 32 Years after 1985 Disaster

by Carlos Navarro

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Exactly 32 years after a devastating earthquake shook central Mexico on Sept. 19, 1985, Mexico City was rocked by another seismic disaster that paralyzed activity in the capital for days. The first earthquake measured 8.1 on the Richter scale; the most recent, which took place last Sept. 19, measured 7.1.

According to the daily newspaper El Universal, citing data from the civil registry in the capital (Registro Civil), 3,692 people died in 1985. This is only an estimate, because several deaths were not reported officially. "The exact total will never be known, because a death certificate was not issued for many victims," the newspaper said. For the most recent earthquake, the number of deaths in Mexico City and surrounding communities, including the city of Puebla, stood at 337 people as of Sept. 27.

Enrique Quintana, editor of the business newspaper El Financiero, noted that attention is justifiably focused on the recent losses of life and property. "The human cost of the Sept. 19 earthquake has left a deep impression and a sense of solidarity that we had not seen in the Mexican capital for the last three decades."

Quintana, however, pointed out that the impact of the quake will probably be much smaller than the one that leveled a good part of the Mexican capital in 1985 ([SourceMex, Sept. 21, 2005](#), and [Sept. 23, 2015](#)).

"Perhaps there are those who believe that the earthquake will ultimately have a big impact on the Mexican economy," he said. "The reality is that the economic impact will probably be marginal. The number of buildings that collapsed in Mexico City is not small. But in terms of percentage, it is a fraction of 1%."

The 1985 earthquake was labeled as a mega-quake, which means it was caused by an extremely long fault. "They produce low, booming, shaking frequencies that can travel for vast distances—think of the bass beat you might hear from a distant rave—and produce the sensation of rolling motion, like the kind you might feel on a boat. Tall buildings are particularly vulnerable to this kind of motion," the Los Angeles Times reported.

Less damage in 2017

According to Quintana, the number of buildings that actually collapsed in the most recent earthquake was close to 40, although many others suffered structural damage that could ultimately force authorities to demolish them. In 1985, 2,850 buildings collapsed as a direct result of the earthquake.

A single digit on the Richter scale can make major difference in the impact of an earthquake. "The measure is based on logarithms and not on lineal considerations," columnist Juan Carlos Ortega

wrote in *Proceso.com*, which publishes the weekly newsmagazine *Proceso*. “This means that an earthquake of an 8.1 magnitude releases 32 times more energy than one that is measured at 7.1.”

The reason this year’s quake caused as much damage to the Mexican capital was that its epicenter was located in nearby Puebla state, 128 km. (80 miles) from Mexico City. In contrast, the 1985 earthquake occurred off the coast of Guerrero, about 420 km. (250 miles) from the capital.

This year’s earthquake “was much closer than the one in 1985, which translated to a greater intensity,” Ortega noted.

Another reason there was as much damage in the Mexican capital this year is that construction guidelines and building codes were not followed uniformly after the 1985 disaster. “Apparently, we did not learn our lesson fully over the past 32 years,” Ortega wrote. “Authorities continued to approve ‘paper’ permits and allowed people to live in old and damaged buildings. On top of that, civil protection authorities did not require sufficient changes, or they allowed those changes to be made in a haphazard manner. Our conscience and our capacity to make demands was absent.”

Still, enough measures were enacted to prevent a much worse disaster in Mexico City, both from an earthquake that rocked southern Mexico—and was felt in the capital—on Sept. 7 ([SourceMex, Sept. 13, 2017](#)) and from the Sept. 19 quake.

“The new generations are better prepared to react in the proper manner to a seismic movement, and the skyscrapers that were erected in recent years resisted earthquakes without problems,” the daily newspaper *El Universal* said in an editorial.

El Universal also pointed to the prevalence of corruption and “anomalies committed by corrupt officials” as a reason why problems persist. “It is true that the collapse of buildings occurred only in specific locations, not over broad areas, which means that the tragedy could have been worse. We must now ask the question why certain buildings collapsed. Was there negligence, conspiracy, or omission at the time the permits for these constructions were awarded?” the newspaper said.

Observers said there was one common denominator for both the 1985 and the 2017 earthquake. “Thirty-two years later, there is a familiar development, as hundreds of volunteers flooded the affected areas to provide assistance in any way possible,” columnist Enrique Acevedo wrote in the daily newspaper *Milenio*. “This was not an especially organized effort, but this doesn’t mean it hasn’t been effective. We had been missing this sense of solidarity, which appears during the most critical times.”

Avoiding political mistakes

For the political class, an appropriate response to the earthquake is crucial in terms of its electoral prospects just a few months before the presidential and federal legislative elections. The governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) is especially vulnerable, given a series of corruption scandals that have rocked the party recently ([SourceMex, April 19, 2017, June 21, 2017, July 19, 2017](#)).

“We’re clearly aware that this is a test we cannot fail,” PRI Sen. Miguel Ángel Chico said in an interview with Reuters.

The PRI is especially keen on avoiding the huge mistake of then-President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), who was Mexico’s leader during the 1985 quake. De la Madrid very publicly refused

international assistance, which delayed rescue and recovery efforts significantly, especially in poor neighborhoods ([SourceMex, July 8, 2009](#)).

“President Miguel de la Madrid’s initial reaction to reject international assistance created a generalized anger among thousands of citizens who saw on their televisions the destruction of dwellings in Tlatelolco and collapsed buildings in poor areas of the Mexican capital,” columnist Jesús Rangel wrote in Milenio.

Many citizens organized to help the poor neighborhoods. “The participation of society in the face of a passive government—Miguel de la Madrid was absent—allowed the residents of the capital to move forward,” columnist Carlos Elizondo Mayer-Serra wrote in Excélsior.

Some political experts believe de la Madrid’s faux pas contributed to the loss of power for the PRI in the Mexican capital. The PRI retained power a few years after the earthquake because the executive still had the ability to appoint the person who would govern the capital. When voters were given the choice to elect the mayor, they opted for the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which has governed Mexico City since 1997.

The current leaders of Mexico and the Mexican capital, which now has the status of a state, have not hesitated to accept outside assistance.

“In contrast to 1985, the governments of President Enrique Peña Nieto and Gov. Miguel Ángel Mancera accepted assistance from other countries and from private sources to address the destruction caused by the earthquake,” Rangel said.

Mancera is a member of the PRD, but his party is expected to face strong competition in the capital from the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) in the upcoming election.

There is a campaign underway urging the political parties to donate the funds they would have received from the federal government for the 2018 elections to the recovery effort. By some estimates, 3,000 buildings or structures are in need of repair or replacement in the capital city. Another 10,000 dwellings in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Morelos, and Puebla will also need to be replaced.

The parties have not yet made actual commitments, but the PRI has proposed offering one-fourth of its election allocation of 258 million pesos (US\$14.2 million).

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who will likely represent Morena in the presidential election, has suggested that the party donate 20% of its allocation. Morena, however, would like the money to go to a special fund (fideicomiso) rather than keep it in the hands of federal authorities to manage directly. Morena leaders say the PRI-led federal government could easily use disaster and recovery assistance to help PRI candidates.

The semi-independent human rights commission (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) has proposed that 30% of the funding for the 2018 elections be reallocated to the federal disaster-assistance fund (Fondo de Desastres Naturales, FONDEN).

Analysts said the decision by parties to donate a portion of the electoral funds is not surprising.

“The citizens are bothered, and their anger is increasingly directed at politicians,” syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said in a piece published in the daily newspaper Reforma. “It is clear

that the political parties realized this situation following the Sept. 7 and Sept. 19 earthquakes and have begun to offer funds for reconstruction.”

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