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## Recovery Assistance Very Slow in Oaxaca Community Affected by Sept. 7 Earthquake

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexico suffered two devastating earthquakes in September, but most of the attention—and recovery assistance—has centered around Mexico City and nearby communities in Puebla and other central states, the areas hit hardest by the second seismic disaster, which measured 7.1 on the Richter scale ([SourceMex, Sept. 27, 2017](#)).

An earthquake two weeks earlier in southern Mexico measured 8.2 on the Richter scale, causing its greatest damage in Oaxaca and Chiapas ([SourceMex, Sept. 13, 2017](#)). By some estimates, the Sept. 7 earthquake damaged 126,000 homes and other structures in more than 1,000 communities in the two states. The greatest problems occurred in Juchitán in Oaxaca, a community of 74,000, where 700 commercial establishments sustained some sort of damage, according to the local branch of the national chamber of commerce (Cámara Nacional de Comercio, CANACO).

Authorities reported more than 471 deaths from the two earthquakes, which affected an estimated 12 million people. More than 42,000 homes and other structures were damaged in 400 municipalities in 10 central and southern states, including at least 16,000 schools and 53 clinics and hospitals.

### *Extensive damage in Juchitán*

CANACO said some of the businesses in Juchitán were forced to close because their premises collapsed completely, while others shut because of the downturn in trade. Thousands of employees have lost their jobs, most without receiving any severance pay.

Even some businesses that escaped serious damage remained closed in the weeks that followed the earthquake because of aftershocks and concerns about safety. Preliminary estimates from CANACO indicate that only 10% of the city's businesses had reopened as of late October.

"In Juchitán we have 1,800 established stores that generate 6,000 direct jobs and another 10,000 in an indirect way," said local CANACO president Juan Gilberto Prado Ramírez. "After the earthquake, about 64,000 people have suffered serious impact on their income."

According to CANACO spokesperson Diego Toledo, the city's commercial hub, the Avenida 5 de Septiembre, is basically abandoned.

"This entire street was once filled with businesses; the residents of Juchitán and neighboring towns came here to supply their businesses: hotels, paint shops, clinics, clothing stores, pharmacies," Toledo said. "Here you could find all kinds of businesses. Now only one or two are open, the ones that are still standing."

Before the earthquake, the city was thriving economically despite the presence of regional criminal organizations in the area.

"We conducted a study in August 2017, and we documented that even with the insecurity [of] the municipality ... on average 20 million pesos (US\$1 million) were generated [in the economy] daily,"

Toledo noted. "But after the September earthquakes, that figure dropped to 3 million pesos (US \$156,000) per day."

Many residents have been unable to rebuild because federal and state assistance has been slow to arrive. However, there are other reasons that make business owners reluctant to rebuild. According to the English-language newspaper Mexico News Daily, the region has experienced more than 8,000 aftershocks since the Sept. 7 earthquake. There have been three aftershocks measuring 6 or higher on the Richter scale in or around Juchitán.

"The constant movements have people in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on edge," Public Radio International (PRI) reported. "Unlike the national and state capital cities, the region does not have a seismic alert system ... So, residents have been relying on their senses and even visual cues, like swaying power lines, to gauge the intensity of an aftershock—or even just confirm that it happened. There have been so many that people are starting to question whether they imagined them."

The continued aftershocks from the Sept. 7 earthquake, whose epicenter was located 133 km southeast of the Chiapas coast, have led residents to avoid the buildings that are still standing. "Nobody wants to be in a fractured building, it's a risk. Nor do they want to be in a place where it hasn't stopped shaking," Leopoldo Torres, a resident of Juchitán, told Mexico News Daily.

Based on studies of other earthquakes of similar or higher magnitude, the possibility remains that aftershocks could continue for some time.

"While it is difficult to offer an accurate forecast, an 8.2 magnitude earthquake could easily continue producing aftershocks for about another six months, perhaps longer," said Raúl Valenzuela, a researcher at the geophysics institute (Instituto de Geofísica) at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

Valenzuela said a precedent was the earthquake off the northeastern shore of Japan in 2011, which measured 9.0 on the Richter scale. That earthquake resulted in aftershocks for about a year.

For residents of Juchitán, there have been other problems in addition to the lack of opportunity to reopen their businesses and repair their homes. These problems include a need to rely on donations of packaged and canned food, which is for most residents a marked change from a daily diet of fresh seafood and produce. "With aftershocks causing choppy waters, villagers aren't fishing much these days. And the price of fresh produce has skyrocketed," PRI reported.

Food distribution has been uneven, which has created tensions among some of the residents, particularly in the part of the city known as Séptima Sección (seventh section). There were reports of people fighting over rations at a distribution site near the Santa Cruz de los Pescadores Catholic Church. The church can no longer provide assistance, as it was one of the structures that had to be demolished in late October because of severe structural damage.

Other types of assistance are also coming very slowly. According to a news report from the national television chain Televisa, people are still standing in line for hours to obtain emergency financial assistance. "Hundreds of residents have stood in line on the street for 36 hours to wait for government support of 2,370 pesos (US\$124) from the government's temporary employment program," Noticias Televisa reported on Oct. 14.

Authorities have also been slow to restore electrical power, water, and other utilities in Juchitán. A scarcity of water locally is partly the function of an unreliable power grid, which was damaged by the earthquake. According to Omar Salinas Castillejos, who heads the municipal water authority (Sistema de Agua Potable, SAP), interruptions in the flow of electricity have prevented authorities from operating pumps, which has left many areas of the city without water.

### *Oaxaca refinery remains closed*

Another significant repercussion of the Sept. 7 earthquake is the extended delay in the reopening of the Antonio Dovalí Jaime oil refinery at Salina Cruz, also in Oaxaca state. The facility, which is about 44 km southwest of Juchitán, was first shut down in July because of an accident and subsequent damage from Tropical Storm Calvin ([SourceMex, July 5, 2017](#)). PEMEX, the state-run oil company kept the facility closed for the next several weeks to allow crews to complete maintenance and repairs.

The Sept. 7 earthquake followed, damaging infrastructure in and around the refinery and forcing authorities to extend the shut-down to determine whether there was further damage and to conduct any needed repairs. PEMEX officials had hoped to reopen the refinery by the end of September, but the continued aftershocks in Oaxaca state, including one measuring 6.1 on the Richter scale on Sept. 23, forced even more delays. The epicenter of the aftershock was only 50 km from the refinery. PEMEX then set the third week of October as a new target, but the facility remained shut at the beginning of November. With aftershocks slowing down the rehabilitation and repair work, PEMEX officials were unable to project a new reopening date.

The shutdown of nearly four months in operations has resulted in the loss of potential production of almost 25 million barrels, PEMEX officials estimate.

### *All is not well in Mexico City*

While residents of Mexico City have had access to extensive resources and financial assistance, the aid has been unevenly distributed. This prompted residents of the capital to hold a large demonstration in late October to ask for more help in rebuilding their homes and businesses and to demand that the process not end up tarnished by corruption.

“Reconstruction without corruption,” “the money of the nation for the reconstruction” or “safe reconstruction” were among the slogans on the signs held by the demonstrators, many of whom came to the event dressed in white. They demanded transparency regarding the donations that the city has received from individuals, civil organizations, and foreign governments.

“Where are they?” a banner asked about the millions of pesos allocated to the capital, both through these donations and through the federal disaster assistance fund (Fondo de Desastres Naturales, FONDEN) and its Mexico City counterpart (Fondo de Atención a los Desastres Naturales en la Ciudad de México, FONADEN CDMX).

“Hundreds of families continue living under tarps and in public spaces, exposed to cold and rain,” said the news site Ríodoce. “Others are sharing homes with relatives, friends, or neighbors because the federal and state governments have failed to meet their commitment to provide them with help.”

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