

One Year Later: The Earthquake Revisited

Twelve months after Mexico City was devastated by a killer quake that caused over 20,000 deaths and changed the city's center forever, survivors remember the event and commemorate their dead.

The initial feelings of impotence and despair soon turned into concern and solidarity. Essential emergency and rescue work was taken up by ordinary people on an unprecedented scale. But the tragedy also aggravated previously existing problems. The destruction of thousands of homes was added to the effects of the current economic crisis on the lives of most Mexican families. Many things have happened since. There is more awareness of the need to study quakes, more concern about preventing a future tragedy of the same magnitude. Through a diversity of testimonies, VOICES OF MEXICO presents a panorama of how the disaster is regarded by its victims, how it has become a part of urban folklore, what the government has accomplished during the year that has gone by, and how the National University got involved and is active in a series of matters linked to the earthquake.



Photo by Renzo Góssoli

Youth pitching in at a vecindad.

The Victims of Colonia Doctores

The September 1985 earthquakes in Mexico City laid bare the housing situation for a very large number of families living in the capital city. Many have no real housing at all, others live in miniscule and overcrowded quarters, in unmaintained buildings that have deteriorated through the years, with poor services.

A number of very old neighborhoods made up primarily of tenement buildings are located in the downtown area where real estate value is extremely high. Many of these tenements were seriously damaged by the quakes and others were completely destroyed. The bulk of reconstruction and repair work in these buildings has fallen on the shoulders of survivors who got together and formed new community organi-

zations to confront the problems left behind in the disaster's wake.

The solidarity of Mexico City dwellers in the aftermath of the earthquake laid the foundation for a new social consciousness among residents of many, many tenement buildings, districts and neighborhoods throughout the city. According to the refrain of a popular urban rock song written after the tragedy, they aspire to build "a different city, a different country, a different life."

The following are testimonies of earthquake victims who live in one of these old downtown residential areas and belong to the *Doctores* Neighborhood Residents' Union.



Photo by Sergio Dorantes



Death in Mexico, as elsewhere, is loss and pain. It is also celebration and humour.

Solidarity

There was tremendous solidarity after the earthquake; everyone helped out, rescuing people who had been trapped, hauling water, carrying away people who were hurt, directing traffic, finding food. Everyone participated, but especially the young people. There were many acts of heroism. A little later people felt the need to get organized to deal with housing problems that were made much worse by the quake.

Mr. Guillermo López, Dr. Vértiz Street

Options

We decided to organize not only to resolve our housing problems, but also to try and solve

some of our other social and economic problems, like creating jobs, forming production cooperatives, rebuilding homes, providing social, health, cultural and recreational services.

Mr. Emilio Salazar, Dr. Bernard Street

Organization

The people in the neighborhood who were involved in local tenants' unions before are the ones who started the new organization. They had already worked together to defend their buildings from evictions or to form housing cooperatives or to seek joint loans. With the earthquake, people began to organize again. It's truly a neighborhood organization; none of the political parties were involved. That's how

A Song Dedicated to the Tragedy

The September 1985 earthquakes profoundly affected Mexico City. In addition to the terrible losses, they also sparked the development of a new social consciousness among certain sectors of the population. This new sense of social responsibility and solidarity is increasingly being expressed in different art forms. Composers and popular singers have written numerous works inspired by September's tragic events and their aftermath.

One very eloquent version of the capital city experience was composed by Mr. Guillerimos Velázquez, a troubador from Huapango Arribeño in the Xichú region of Guanajuato. The verses that follow are a translation of a song, originally written in the traditional *corrido* form, dedicated to the Mexicans who helped during the tragedy and to the victims who continue to struggle for better living conditions. The song was taped during a performance by the composer and the "Lions of the Xichú Mountains."



What a great example was set by those Mexicans
Who helped in the cataclysm's midst;
There were countless heroic deeds
That surprised both friends and strangers.

Just moments after the destructive quake
So many worked with zeal and fearless to clear away the rubble,
Digging with fingernails and feet, their hands and faces bloody
Rescuing other human beings for the simple fact of being.
And perhaps the whole world was watching!

Far from abandoning the terrified thousands to their fate
People flowed like rivers to seize life from death's grip.
This fact alone turned misfortune into brotherhood and warmth.
And it's right to feel proud, even as hardship strikes
When the solidarity is so very strong!

As always, those who have the least, the humble, the oppressed,
Give their bodies, blood and lives, their solidarity and support for all.
That anguished mothers may find peace, that the young and old are joined,
A sandwich, a soda for those in need and care for the thousands of injured.
We're still moved by it all today!

Men and women, boys and girls all formed brigades to help
Find food and household needs, no truce by day or night,
Many didn't sleep a wink; in shelters and homes they were
The Samaritans, consoling, lending a hand, digging through the rubble.
I am thinking of all of you!

There were no doubt the vile ones who stooped so low in fact
To try to take advantage, like vultures or hyenas,
But this handful of the wicked were foiled in their aims.
The evil few in no way dim the people's bright example
That moves me to proclaim:

What a great example was set by those Mexicans
Who helped in the cataclysm's midst
There were countless heroic deeds
That surprised both friends and strangers.

Like a river spilling over with attention and with aid,
When people unite there's power, that point was amply made.

The usual indifference, the daily routine
And city life's inertia were all at once shattered
As people went from place to place
Wherever there were needy; what great solidarity.
And Mexico, the colossal city, was like a river overflowing.

Neighbors organized and gave medical aid,
Official channels could not meet the great demand,
Ants' nests of activity were everywhere
To take up the noble task; and with this somber episode
Our consciousness developed: when people unite, there's power.

Thousands of people together lightened sorrow's burden
Formed new organizations that still survive today
Became a single force of awareness and decision
Like a river overflowing that grows and doesn't fade;
When people unite there's power, that point was amply made.

If I seem a bit muddled, I really must explain,
It's hard to be creative in the midst of so much pain.

Transcribed by: **M.A. Díaz León**, Communication Workers

special section

the Union was formed, based on previous organizing experiences. That's how it could consolidate so quickly.

Mr. Germán Valdéz, Dr. Vértiz Street

Our Roots and Our Unity

We've always been united here. But with the earthquake we've all grown even closer. So many of us have lived here for years; we're really like one big family. We all know each other, our children were all born here and they grew up here. After the earthquake we didn't know where to go or what to do, so we formed a little association among ourselves. We began to help each other and to collect money for reconstruction and all the other things we needed. Now we're all in the Union, and that's helped a lot.

Mr. Francisco Melgar, Dr. Velasco Street

Problems

We've had to face many difficulties even though we are in touch with the Ministry of Urban Development and Ecology and the city government. They've created a lot of obstacles as we've tried to solve our housing problems. They're constantly changing construction standards, they order suspensions on works they've already approved because of supposed legal problems; the owners of the tenement buildings who were expropriated under the Presiden-

tial Decree* take their cases to court, and we can't do anything. Government officials give orders to stop work and there's nothing you can do; in the meantime, many of our houses are falling down, and we're living in the street.

Mr. José Hernández, Dr. Arce Street

I Agree

I agree with what *don* Pancho Melgar just said. I agree with everything he said because here in the neighborhood we're completely united. We'd like it better if they didn't interrupt our work so much, telling us tomorrow or the day after, just leaving us hanging. We want something real. We want them just to let us work. If the government really wants to help, that's fine, but we don't want them to try to take us for a ride.

Mr. Felipe Baeza, Dr. Velasco Street

Building

The Union was set up legally as a housing cooperative to help make housing more accessible for residents, to help get credit and non-governmental assistance so we can have de-

*Shortly after the earthquake, President De la Madrid ordered the expropriation of some 8000 residential units in areas most severely affected by the disaster. Properties are to be turned over to the former tenants as part of the efforts to solve the housing crisis.

A Comprehensive Study of Seismic Areas

A few short hours after the earthquake that shook Mexico City on September 19, 1985, the UNAM's Institute of Geophysics sent a team of researchers and technicians to Zihuatanejo to install a series of portable seismographs near the tremor's epicenter. Personell from the Institute of Engineering were also part of the team interested in defining the rupture zone—the area of the fault—to find out its size and location along the Mexican coast.

Doctors Lautaro Ponce and Gerardo Suárez, researchers at the Institute, added that following this first stage of the project, the registers were studied and the epicenters of post-quake tremors were located. This in turn led to placement of the fault's length at 180 kms. (112.5 miles) along the Pacific coastline. Dr. Suárez indicated that they

had also worked with teleseismic data obtained from observatories abroad to determine the earthquake's characteristics, "and we realized it actually consisted of two events. What everyone felt as a single long tremor was actually two different movements with a lapse of 27 seconds between one and the other. This probably had the effect of intensifying the earthquake."

When asked whether there was any kind of natural indication that a quake was about to happen, Dr. Suárez said there were not enough factors to go on to make a prediction possible. "It was known that the coast of Michoacán, where the Cocos platform tends to slip under the North American platform, had high seismic potential and that a strong earthquake was likely to happen," added the scientists. The fault's movements are

neither constant nor systematic because the platforms block and jam each other, accumulate energy and suddenly slide. "There are similar areas in Guerrero, for example, with a long history of tremors. Yet neither the Large Coast nor the Small Coast (names given to these coastal regions in the state of Guerrero) have suffered a serious earthquake since the turn of the century, and this is why one can be expected at any time now. The more time goes by the more energy is stored up and the strength of the tremor tends to be greater."

Doctor Ponce said the Institute of Geophysics, in collaboration with colleagues from the French city of Strasbourg, installed a telemetric seismic network that extends for 80 kms (50 miles) along the coast of Guerrero. "We think another important

measure is to set up new seismometrical stations throughout the country. Tremors equal to or greater than 7.5 on the Richter scale take place at an approximate average of every three years, and there have been some 50 quakes stronger than 7.0 during the present century," added the researcher.

Finally, the scientists underlined the fact that even though work is carried out to reach a better understanding of seismographic phenomenae in order to eventually be able to predict the earth's movements, the most important thing at present is to locate those areas with the greatest seismic potential. These studies would then serve as guides to establish building codes and regulations as well as other types of civil security measures.

Haroldo Shetemul

What the Government Has Done

At precisely 7:19 on the morning of Sept. 19 President Miguel de la Madrid, secretaries of state, legislators, government officials and military officers gathered for a minute of silence in memory of the thousands who died in the earthquake that shook Mexico City exactly a year ago. The president then proceeded to the center of the Plaza de la Constitución in front of the National Palace and lowered the Mexican flag to half mast as a sign of mourning.

At the same time, people from all over the city gathered at the sites where thousands lost their lives to remember family and friends. Flowers and flaming candles were placed on the ground and everyone held their own moments of silence.

Later the same day Miguel de la Madrid and his retinue gathered at the Garden of Solidarity, built on the site of what was formerly the Regis Hotel, totally destroyed by the earthquake. The president layed a wreath of flowers on the site and stood at attention as part of an honour guard. Then he unveiled

a plaque that reads: "To the solidarity of all Mexicans. September 19, 1985-86."

Yet reconstruction is still not over. The previous day De la Madrid had visited the poor barrios most damaged by the earthquake and handed over the deeds to 6,824 housing units built by the Office for Housing Renovation. This means that 80.9% of this specific program, as well as 75.5% of the four government programs set up to replace housing lost to the 90,000 families left homeless by the quake, where still pending.

At an evaluation meeting held by the National Reconstruction Committee following the commemorative ceremonies, Budget and Planning Secretary Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who also heads the Committee, said that normality will not be a pretext for forgetting or filing away the problems of reconstruction. Mr. de Gortari reported that as of Sept. 15 the National Reconstruction Fund set up with foreign and domestic donations, had received 43.65 billion pesos, 41.416 billion of which had

been used. The Fund's income in dollars came to 14.2 million out of which \$9.8 million had been used.

He also reported that 1,472 damaged school-buildings had been repaired, while the health sector had been assigned 57 billion pesos to replace lost hospital beds, medical equipment and buildings lost in the quake. Yet figures show that reconstruction in health and education alone requires close to 300 billion pesos.

The situation is really still precarious. The country's economic problems hinder the use of available resources to speed up reconstruction. At the Committee meeting President De la Madrid stated that: "We regard the legitimate impatience of those who lost everything as a challenge which must be met with the scarce resources available and as an enormous task that must be carried out urgently. We will continue to stand up to our commitment toward those still suffering from the effects of the tragedy."

Over 20,000 families are still liv-

ing in street camps and shelters, and overall some 68,000 homes need to be built or repaired. On Sept. 19, 1986, close to 100,000 people demonstrated in Mexico City demanding speedier reconstruction efforts and an extension of the 1985 decree that expropriated 4,323 urban properties in order to alleviate the housing problem aggravated by the earthquake. Congress had already picked up on the demand and was studying it. Miguel de la Madrid admitted that reconstruction is by no means over and that, "the wounds caused by the disaster are still open. our efforts are not over yet. Nonetheless, we have come through a painful and difficult ordeal strengthened by greater confidence in ourselves and in our capacity to face up to the challenges imposed on us by fate."

September 19, 1986, was an expression of Mexico's mourning as well as of its efforts to rebuild what nature, in a sweep of her hand, took from us a year ago.

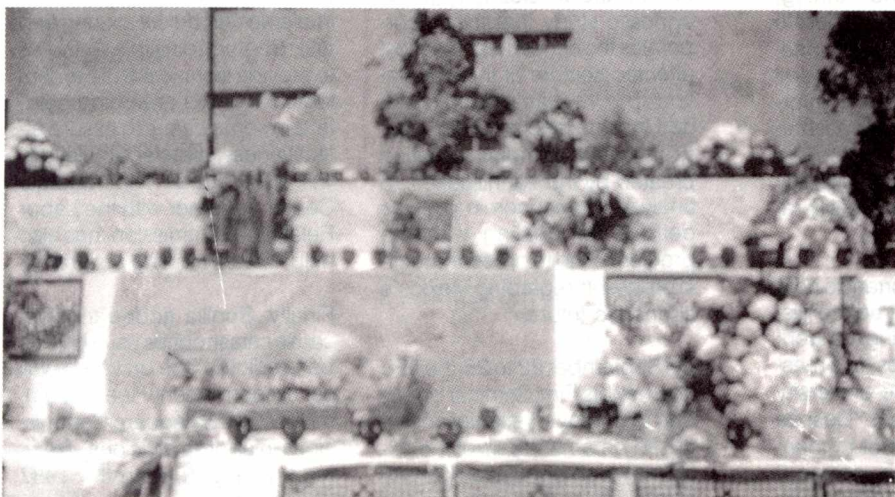
Jorge Luis Sierra Guzmán

cent housing. We want to by-pass the bureaucratic obstacles created by the officials. We want to build.

Ms. Irma Lara, Dr. Erazo Street

Happy and Sad

When our homes are being rebuilt, we're both happy and sad. Happy because at last we're going to have a house again, but sad, too, because we'll have to go live in the "chicken coops" (slang name for the temporary shelters



Traditional "offering" to the dead at Nuevo León building in Tlatelolco



Some 300 apartments went down in the Nuevo León building, which became a symbol of the earthquake's victims.

Photo by Susan Masuoka

Photo by Susan Masuoka

The National University's Involvement

Despite the unexpected nature of last September's seismic activity, the university community was able to respond immediately to help victims. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), in addition to providing assistance in hard hit areas, devoted major energies to studying the disaster's repercussions as part of its contribution to national reconstruction; and it intensified the search for ways to predict future earthquakes, in the hopes of avoiding the loss of human life and property.

That's how Fausto Burgueño, Director of the UNAM's Institute for Economic Research (IIEc), explained the university's role in the aftermath of the disaster. In an interview with *Voices of Mexico*, one year after the quakes, he continued, "the UNAM was able, in just a few hours, to organize special brigades made up of people from the medical, engineering and architecture schools, among others."

After this first phase of humanitarian aid, the university began to gather information and statistics. The work carried out by the Institute for Social Research was particularly important in this regard, organizing some 300 volunteers to conduct a survey among the victims.

"In general in Mexico, no one was prepared for that kind of contingency, but in the particular case of the university community, our structure facilitated our being able to act from the very first instant of the tragedy," explained the IIEc's director. "The affected areas laid bare very serious problems in the Mexican economy and society. From there, as social scientists, it was extremely important to begin studying the socio-economic impact of the seismic events."

UNIVERSITY BRIGADES IN THE AFFECTED ZONES

To get a more detailed view of the university's activities after the earthquake, we interviewed

Lauro Bonilla Marín, head of the Social Communication and Information Division of the General Office of Medical Services (DGMS, better known as University City Medical Center). He agreed with his colleague Fausto Burgueño regarding the UNAM's rapid response to the disaster: "By 10 a.m. on September 19, brigades had been organized to provide first aid for victims, to rescue those trapped and to recover bodies and others to catalog medicines and collect foodstuffs. The next day we began to receive clothing and other goods donated by academic staff, students and other employees. Within four days, the Medical Center could no longer store all the donated material, so it was taken to University Stadium. The brigades worked 24 hours a day."

Dr. Jorge Carpizo, Rector of the UNAM, designated Dr. Alfonso Millán, director of the DGSM, to coordinate the university's activities, which at one point included 852 brigades, composed of some 7000 people from the university community. In the days following the quakes, they participated in rescue operations, furnished aid to the victims, inspected buildings, provided psychological therapy, cremated bodies, distributed medicines, provisions and clothing, delivered plasma and blood to hospitals and provided information and advice to the general population. Reports and information on danger areas and the location of shelters and collection centers were transmitted by *Radio UNAM*, the university radio station.

In addition, it is important to note that Dr. Carpizo toured the disaster areas, inspecting the work done by the brigades. In a message directed to the university community, he stated, "Despite the grief in this time of tremendous tragedy and national mourning, we are comforted by the fact that the University is fulfilling its obligations to the country and by our firm conviction that

the whole of Mexican society will soon heal its wounds and advance quickly in the tasks of recuperation and reconstruction. Thank you for your collaboration, your solidarity and your eagerness to help."

THE UNAM WORKS IN NATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION

According to the Director of the IIEc, one of the UNAM's major contributions to solving some of the earthquake related problems has been to develop research that may provide new ideas for dealing with the very high human population densities found in certain geographic regions of Mexico, as well as for predicting major earthquakes. Virtually all of the UNAM's research facilities are involved in these kinds of activities.

As an example of these efforts, Burgueño mentioned a "Project Proposal to Analyze the Current Socio-Economic Situation and its Perspectives After the September 19th and 20th Earthquakes," published by the journal *Problemas del Desarrollo* (Problems in Development), as "Economic Crisis, Earthquakes and Economic Policy." The main objective of the effort is to add to an analysis of the implications of earthquakes, contributing to the reconstruction process through the development of a diagnostic study that fully incorporates the concerns of the most affected sectors of the population. The Institute's Director added that the idea is to help clarify the very complex situation created by the earthquakes, to analyze the economic policies defined for dealing with the problems and to present specific proposals regarding Mexico's economic future.

On September 22 to 25, the IIEc also held its First Seminar on Urban Economy. Presentations focused on an analysis of the extremely high population density in the Mexico City metropolitan area and the economic crisis among marginal social sectors; both are aspects of the country's

general situation, which together with other phenomena, have produced serious negative effects in the post-earthquake period.

The speakers emphasized that the country's rapid economic growth in recent times created significant modifications in the society's configuration and structure, as well as in the ecosystem. This has led to the consolidation of a highly urbanized population, with more than 50% of the country's people now living in cities. Thus, it was really inevitable that the high degree of urban concentration should have repercussions in the earthquake's aftermath. One of the conclusions drawn was that it is necessary to seek measures, through medium and long term planning, which can reverse the trends of chaotic growth and the over-concentration of the human population.

In terms of the UNAM's academic work, emphasis was placed on the need to define and systematize specific areas of research, analysis and reflection that can help in the search for solutions to the country's socio-economic problems, without ignoring their necessary relationship to the other sciences, as well.

Returning to the very immediate problems associated with major catastrophes, Bonilla Marín explained that the UNAM is taking a series of preventive measures to avoid a repeat of September 1985, when initial responses were insufficient. University experts have designed a permanent plan contemplating basic measures to be implemented before, during and after a natural disaster. Activities to provide technical and psychological training are being held, and in some cases to assure effectiveness, disaster simulations will be staged. The Medical Center, together with the Labor Relations Commission, has also held first aid training programs.

Finally, Bonilla added that because catastrophes usually can't be predicted, the university will set up permanent Health Committees and Safeguard Commissions in all of its divisions. Training will begin during the 1987 academic year.

Haroldo Shetemul

set up in badly damaged neighborhoods) for a while.

Ms. Sara' López de Aguirre, Dr. Vértiz St.

Work

We went through quite an ordeal for a while, but by making sacrifices you can get so much accomplished. We're working with picks and shovels, men and women with wheel barrels carting away the rubble. The children are working, too, running errands, carrying smaller rocks, everyone. There's the proof that together we can get things done.

Ms. Berta Hernández R., Dr. C. Bernard St.

Accomplishments

The Union's already built a day care center that's about to be inaugurated. And we set up a clinic and a legal aid office. We've worked on reconstruction plans for 25 buildings, and we're about to start work on them.

Mr. Guillermo López, Dr. Vértiz Street

Women

Since the men have to go to work every day, we women try to make a little time for the Union.



Women carry on with reconstruction in Colonia Doctores.

We're working in the day care center, we set up a sewing course so we could learn and bring in a little extra money. We also help build our houses, we help the construction workers, but we also leave some of the work for the men.

Ms. Juanita Amaro, Dr. Erazo Street

Youth

All over the city you could see young people helping out after the earthquake. We were the majority of the volunteers in the rescue work after the quake, and for days after, there were still many, many young people helping out in the streets. Now lots of us teenagers in the neighborhood have organized to help rebuild housing, and we've also organized soccer tournaments and races; we've held cultural and art fairs. Here in the neighborhood there are lots of bars and plenty of other places to go if you're looking for trouble. There's got to be other ways to have a good time, to relax, right.

Mr. Gabriel Ledezma, Dr. Vértiz Street

The Neighborhood

Our neighborhood is old and poor, with lots of old tenements that are really deteriorated. We are all poor people; our daily lives are very, very simple. We all know each other in the tenement, and we even know lots of people along the street, we always say hi to each other; it's like one big family.

Ms. Juanita Amaro, Dr. Erazo Street

Social Consciousness

Because of the earthquake we started to talk to each other more, we got to know more about each others' lives, about our families. We've become more united. There was so much solidarity, and we've become more and united because we all have the same problems, and we all want to solve them. That's why we've united more, because our problems are exactly the same.

Ms. Isabel Celia Rivas, Dr. Velazco Street

The Future

We're not going to stop here.

Ms. Irma Lara, Dr. Erazo Street ★

Compiled by M.A. Díaz León,
Communication Workers