

Massive Earthquake in Mexico: Citizens and Leadership Matter

Though earthquakes are not new to Mexico, what is new is the initial indication that citizens and local leadership matters.

A magnitude 7.1 earthquake stunned central Mexico yesterday killing at least 149 people as hundreds of buildings collapsed in heaps of dust. Government officials have said at least 21 children and several adults have died at an elementary school in the city after it partially collapsed. Over 500 soldiers and navy marines are among those searching for children and employees still missing. Citizens in thousands fled into the streets in panic, but many stayed to help rescue those trapped. What is striking, so far, is local citizen-to-citizen help which is often discounted in most humanitarian responses.

The buildings tumbled into mounds of rubble or were severely damaged in densely populated parts of Mexico City and nearby areas. Those buildings built in the past three decades seem to be more affected by the earthquake in comparison with those built over fifty years ago.

Mexico's president threw himself into areas badly hit by devastating earthquake amid frustration in getting food and water to stricken communities where over two million were left in need of aid. Mayor Miguel Angel Mancera is providing much needed local leadership where it mattered the most.

Hours after the quake, rescue workers and citizens were searching through the wreckage of a primary school—that partly collapsed in the

city's South area—looking for any children who might be trapped.

The quake is the deadliest in Mexico since the 1985 quake on the same date which killed thousands. The latest quake came less than two weeks after another powerful quake that caused 90 deaths and widespread damage.

Luis Felipe Puente, head of the national Civil Defence agency, tweeted that the confirmed death toll had risen to 139. This total may go up. Loss and damage to property is yet to be reported.

Mayor Mancera said over 60 people were rescued alive by the citizens and emergency workers in the capital. Rapid response by citizens was effective and visible. Authorities said at least 70 people in the capital had been hospitalised for injuries. The hospitals jumped to respond to the sudden needs related to injuries. Private clinics offered help for minor injuries. Health workers with

volunteer citizens visited affected areas.

The federal interior minister, Miguel Angel Osorio Chong, said authorities had reports of people possibly still being trapped in collapsed buildings. He said search efforts were slow because of the fragility of rubble.

Earlier workplaces across Mexico City held earthquake readiness drills for the citizens on the anniversary of the 1985 quake—a magnitude 8.0 shake—that killed thousands of people and devastated large parts of the city. The drill included mock rapid response by health, civil defence, and city authorities.

The reduction in loss of life between 1985 and 2017 earthquake impact is so far attributed to citizen-to-citizen action and strong local city and civil defence leadership. ■

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Rescue teams look for people trapped in the rubble at the Enrique Rebsamen elementary school in Mexico City, in this still taken from Mexican TV. Photograph: STR/AFP/Getty Images