

Death toll mounts to 41 in Ecuador quake

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Quito: At least 41 people were killed after a powerful, 7.8-magnitude earthquake shook Ecuador's central coast on Saturday, cracking buildings and rattling homes as far away as the capital of Quito.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the shallow quake was centered 27 kilometers (16 miles) south-southeast of Muisne, Ecuador, in a sparsely populated area of fishing ports popular with tourists.

Sadly the information we currently have is that 41 citizens have lost their lives in this emergency... This death toll will unfortunately rise in the coming hours,"Â Country's vice president George Glas said in televised comments.

A tsunami threat was issued for the coasts of Ecuador, Columbia, Costa Rica, Panama and Peru.

In the port city of Guayaquil, an overpass collapsed on top of a car and the roof of a shopping center buckled. In Manta, the airport was closed after the control tower suffered severe damages.

President Rafael Correa called on Ecuadoreans to show strength while he and authorities monitor events.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said hazardous tsunami waves are possible for some coasts. But the government's natural disaster agency didn't issue a tsunami alert.

In the capital, the quake was felt for about 40 seconds and people fled to the streets in fear. Quito is located about 170 kilometers (105 miles) from the quake's epicenter. The quake appeared to have knocked out electricity and cellphone coverage in several neighborhoods in the capital.

"I'm in a state of panic," said Zoila Villena, one of many Quito residents who congregated in the streets. "My building moved a lot and things fell to the floor. Lots of neighbors were screaming and kids crying."

The USGS originally put the quake at a magnitude of 7.4 then raised it to 7.8. It had a depth of 19 kilometers.

Several aftershocks, some as strong as 5.6 on the Richter scale, continued in the hour after the first quake, which occurred at nightfall.

Guayaquil's international airport was also closed because of a lack of communications.

- (With AP inputs)