

## **Many missing as Colombia mudslide kills more than 200**

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**BOGOTA (Colombia):** The number of people killed in Colombia after a surge of mud and water from three overflowing rivers swept through a small city has risen to 200.

People in Mocoa pried through piles of rocks and wooden planks that entombed homes. Streets were covered in thick sand, mud and tree limbs from the rivers and rainforest that surround the city.

There was little drinking water and no power, which forced authorities to suspend the search and rescue effort during the night.

The National Disaster Agency said Sunday that the death toll was at 200, with another 200 injured, but authorities conceded it could easily go higher because many people were still unaccounted for and dozens were airlifted to hospitals in other cities in critical condition, mostly children.

Bodies were being placed in a temporary morgue where three teams of medical examiners were working around the clock to swiftly identify the remains.

In addition, Gov. Sorrel Aroca of Putumayo Department, which includes Mocoa, said there are also people reported missing in surrounding communities.

Authorities and residents in the city tucked between mountains along Colombia's southern border spent Saturday tending to victims, trying to find homes on streets reduced to masses of rubble and engaged in a desperate search to locate loved ones who disappeared in the dark of night. Authorities expect the death toll to rise.

Eduardo Vargas, 29, was asleep with his wife and 7-month-old baby when he was awoken by the sound of neighbors banging on his door. He quickly grabbed his family and fled up a small mountain amid the cries of people in panic.

"There was no time for anything," he said.

Vargas and his family huddled with about two dozen other residents as rocks, trees and wooden planks ripped through their neighborhood below. They waited there until daylight, when members of the military helped them down.

When he reached the site of his home Saturday, nothing his family left behind remained.

"Thank God we have our lives," he said.

President Juan Manuel Santos traveled to Mocoa and declared the city a disaster zone Saturday. The Air Force transported 19 patients to a city farther north and said 20 more would be evacuated soon. Medicine and surgical supplies were being sent to the city as the area's regional hospital struggled to cope with the magnitude of the crisis.

Herman Granados, an anesthesiologist, said he worked throughout the night on victims. He said the hospital didn't have a blood bank large enough to deal with the number of patients and was quickly running out of its supply.

Some of the hospital workers came to help even though their own relatives remained missing.

"Under the mud," Granados said, "I am sure there are many more."

Santos blamed climate change for triggering the avalanche, saying that the accumulated rainfall in one night was almost half the amount Mocoa normally receives in the entire month of March.

With the rainy season in much of Colombia just beginning, he said local and national authorities need to redouble their efforts to prevent a similar tragedy.

The crisis is likely to be remembered as one of the worst natural disasters in recent Colombian history, though the Andean nation has experienced even more destructive environmental catastrophes.

Nearly 25,000 people were killed in 1985 after the Nevado del Ruiz volcano erupted and triggered a deluge of mud and debris that buried the town of Armero.

The tragedy drew international attention, with even Pope Francis mentioning the catastrophe during his Angelus blessing Sunday on a visit to the northern Italian region of Emilia Romagna, which was struck by a pair of deadly earthquakes five years ago.

As rescuers in Mocoa shifted through debris, many residents were conducting their own searches for lost loved ones.

Oscar Londono tried in vain throughout the night to reach his wife's parents, whose home is right along one of the flooded rivers.

He decided it was too dangerous to try to reach them in the dark. So he called over and over by phone but got no answer.

Once the sun began to rise he started walking toward their house but found all the streets he usually takes missing.

As he tried to orient himself he came across the body of a young woman dressed in a mini-skirt and black blouse.

He checked her pulse but could not find one.

"There were bodies all over," he said.

When he finally reached the neighborhood where his in-laws live he found "just mud and rocks." Rescue workers with the military oriented him toward the mountain, where he found his relatives camped with other survivors.

"To know they were alive," he said, "it was a reunion of tears."

- (With inputs from AP)