

32 dead as massive 8.1 magnitude earthquake rocks southern Mexico; small tsunami triggered

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Mexico City: One of the most powerful earthquakes ever to strike Mexico has hit off its southern Pacific coast, killing at least 32 people, toppling houses, government offices and businesses while sending panicked people into the streets more than 1,000 kms away.

Mexico City after the earthquake that struck in the early hours on Friday

The US Geological Survey said the earthquake hit off Chiapas state near the Guatemalan border with a magnitude of 8.1, slightly stronger than the magnitude 8 quake of 1985 that killed thousands and devastated large parts of Mexico City.

Oaxaca state Gov Alejandro Murat told local news media that at least 23 people had died in his coastal state. Civil defence officials said at least seven died in Chiapas and two others in the Gulf coast state of Tabasco.

Hundreds of buildings collapsed or were damage, power was cut at least briefly to more than 1.8 million people and authorities closed schools Friday in at least 11 states to check them for safety.

"The house moved like chewing gum and the light and internet went out momentarily," said Rodrigo Soberanes, who lives near the Chiapas state city of San Cristobal de las Casas.

The US Geological Survey recorded at least 20 aftershocks of magnitude 4.0 or greater within about five hours after the main shake, and the president warned that a major aftershock as large as magnitude 7.2 could occur.

The USGS said the quake struck at 11:49 pm yesterday local time and its epicenter was 165 kilometers west of Tapachula in Chiapas. It had a depth of 69.7 kilometers. The quake caused buildings to sway violently in Mexico's capital more than 650 miles (1,000 kilometers) away. As beds banged against walls, people still wearing pajamas fled into the streets, gathering in frightened groups.

Chiapas Gov. Manuel Velasco said that three people were killed in San Cristobal, including two women who died when a house and a wall collapsed. He called on people living near the coast to leave their houses as a protective measure.

"There is damage to hospitals that have lost energy," he said. "Homes, schools and hospitals have been damaged."

Tabasco Gov Arturo Nunez said one child died in his state when a wall collapsed, and the other was an infant who died in a children's hospital that lost electricity, cutting off its ventilator.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said waves of one meter (3.3 feet) above the tide level were measured off Salina Cruz, Mexico. Smaller tsunami waves were observed on the coast or measured by ocean gauges in several other places.

The center's forecast said Ecuador, El Salvador and Guatemala could see waves of a meter or less. No threat was

posed to Hawaii and the western and South Pacific.

Mexican authorities said they were evacuating some residents of coastal Tonalá and Puerto Madero because of the warning.

The quake hit as Mexican emergency agencies were bracing for another crisis on the other side of the country. The U.S. National Hurricane Center said Hurricane Katia was likely to strike the Gulf coast in the state of Veracruz early Saturday as a Category 2 storm that could bring life-threatening floods.

- AP