

Mexico mourns 66 dead after twin punch of quake, hurricane

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Mexico City: Amid the sounds of snare drums, saxophones and sobbing, Mexicans today began mourning some of the 66 dead after a one-two punch from a monster earthquake and a Gulf coast hurricane.

A man removes debris from a collapsed building in Juchitan, Mexico

Hardest hit was Juchitan, a Oaxaca state city where 36 people died when the magnitude 8.1 quake toppled buildings. Slow-moving funeral processions converged on one of Juchitan's cemeteries from all directions today sometimes causing temporary gridlock when they encountered each other at intersections.

The cemetery swelled with mourners and noisy serenades for the dead. Pallbearers carried the caskets around rubble the quake had knocked from the simple concrete crypts.

Jittery amid continued aftershocks, friends and relatives of the deceased had hushed conversations in the Zapotec language as they stood under umbrellas for shade from the beating sun.

Paulo Cesar Escamilla Matus and his family held a memorial service for his mother, Reynalda Matus Martinez, in the living room of her home, where relatives quietly wept beside her body.

The 64-year-old woman was working the night shift at a neighborhood pharmacy when the quake struck Thursday night, collapsing the building.

"All the weight of the second floor fell on top of her," said her son, who rushed to the building and found her under rubble.

He and neighbors tried to dig her out, but weren't able to recover her body until the next morning when civil defense workers brought a backhoe that could lift what had trapped her.

Fearful of crime, the pharmacy kept its doors locked, and Escamilla Matus wondered if that had cost his mother the time she needed to escape.

Scenes of mourning were repeated over and over again in Juchitan, where a third of the city's homes collapsed or were uninhabitable, President Enrique Pena Nieto said late yesterday in an interview with the Televisa news network. Part of the city hall collapsed.

The remains of brick walls and clay tile roofs cluttered streets as families dragged mattresses onto sidewalks to spend a second anxious night sleeping outdoors.

Some were newly homeless, while others feared further aftershocks could topple their cracked adobe dwellings.

Rescuers searched for survivors with sniffer dogs and used heavy machinery at the main square to pull rubble away from city hall, where a missing police officer was believed to be inside.

The city's civil defense coordinator, Jose Antonio Marin Lopez, said similar searches had been going on all over the area.

Teams found bodies in the rubble, but the highlight was pulling four people, including two children, alive from the completely collapsed Hotel Del Rio, where one woman died.

"The priority continues to be the people," Marin said.

Larissa Garcia Ruiz was grateful to escape with only a broken arm when her house collapsed as she and her family slept.

"I only woke up when I heard screaming," said the 24-year-old cradling her wrapped arm.

Her mother managed to just push the daughters and her blind husband through the back doorway before a massive section of thick wall fell, trapping her.

As Larissa tried to help rescue her mother, another piece of rubble fell, breaking her arm. Other relatives and friends finally managed to release the trapped woman.

All around them people yelled for help that night.

"Nobody helped us," her sister Vicenta said. "Everybody got out as best they could."

In addition to the deaths in Juchitan, nine other people died in Oaxaca, while twenty-five people were killed by the quake in neighboring states. Two others died in a mudslide in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz after Hurricane Katia hit late yesterday.

Pena Nieto said authorities were working to re-establish supplies of water and food and provide medical attention to those who need it. He vowed the government would help rebuild.

Power was cut at least briefly to more than 1.8 million people due to the quake, and authorities closed schools in at least 11 states to check them for safety.

The Interior Department reported that 428 homes were destroyed and 1,700 were damaged just in Chiapas, the state closest to the epicenter.

Just one day later, Hurricane Katia hit land north of Tecolutla in Veracruz state, pelting the region with intense rains and maximum sustained winds of 120 kmph.

Veracruz Governor Miguel Angel Yunes said two people died in a mudslide related to the storm, and he said some rivers had risen to near flood stage, but there were no reports of major damage.

Veracruz and neighboring Puebla states evacuated more than 4,000 people ahead of the storm's arrival.

The Hurricane Center said Katia could still bring 7.5 to 15 centimeters of additional rain 25 to 37 centimeters to a region with a history of deadly mudslides and flooding.

- AP