

# Death, agony, tragedy and miracles in the wake of Mexico's earthquake

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Lawrence Elliott is a Unionville resident and co-owner of Omniventre Travel in the Sherwood Plaza in Markham. He recently returned from Mexico City and reports in this article on what it was like in the days following the devastating earthquake.

By LAWRENCE ELLIOTT  
Sitting in a departure salon at Mexico City International Airport waiting for Mexicana 802 to Chicago, the killer earthquake seemed like a million years before rather than just two weeks.

Life seemed to go on for most, as passengers came and went like in any other large airport. Except many were still arriving looking for loved ones they had not heard from as yet. It was the very reason that brought me to Mexico just a few days after the disaster.

When we first heard of the quake, everyone was going through a typical day at Omniventre Travel where my wife Rosenda was helping us out. Word had come from friends at Mexicana Airlines and the Mexican Tourist Council but no one was certain of the magnitude of the destruction.

At home that evening, the panic began as rumors flew via telephone within the Mexican community in Toronto. What areas in Mexico were affected and to what extent no one really knew for sure.

Friday morning, after a sleepless night, we decided that my wife would be less distraught if she could go and find her family. Thank heavens for Thomson Vacation which arranged several tickets for Mexicans working in travel and tourism in Canada. It was a worrisome and concerned "Adios" as many, including my wife, bid goodbye to friends and family as they boarded a CP Air charter to Acapulco.

### Bad news

All weekend the news from Mexico seemed worse, with no specific word from family, only the pictures of the destruction emanating from CTV and The Star.

By Monday morning not knowing was unbearable, so with the assistance and compassionate help of everyone at Mexicana and United Airlines, I decided to join my wife in Mexico. I flew to O'Hare Airport in Chicago, then boarded the 2 a.m. "Nighthawk" to Mexico City.

In the dim light of 5:30 a.m. everything in Mexico City seemed so normal. No building crumbled, no ambulances screaming their way through the dawn, at least not on the way from the airport.

At 6:20 a.m. I arrived at the home of my brother-in-law Andres, to awake a startling family including my wife. No immediate family members had been hurt or killed.

However, my youngest brother-in-law's girlfriend lost her aunt, uncle and tiny baby boy. They had been crushed to death in their apartment while at breakfast as their building crumbled around them. They were found with the father on top of his wife and son in a futile attempt to protect his family.

After some sleep and breakfast we passed the day following the TV news and listening to stories of horror and hope. Estimates ranged upwards of 30,000 people dead, but official death tolls were much lower. My brother-in-law had been at a different disaster site each night trying to assist.

### Many homeless

The first night after her arrival, my wife, her brother and his wife, Maite, had taken food and fruit juice in packages for 150. The goods had been donated by Maite's father to areas designated by the government as desperately in need. Thousands were sleeping in the streets afraid to back inside the buildings, prohibited from entering certain areas or left homeless.

At 10:30 p.m. Tuesday, Andres, Maite, Rosenda and I left with Pablo, a Red Cross volunteer, for the worst hit area. With an emergency flasher, helmets, water, fire extinguishers and battery powered lamps, we passed through the Mexican Army checkpoint.

Here there were hundreds of people, just sitting around and waiting. They were prohibited from entering the area but they remained, awaiting word of their relatives perhaps still alive, trapped in the ruins of an apartment building destroyed in the Tlatelolco Housing complex.

We were overwhelmed by the tragedy of the situation. Huge cranes were ready to do the heavy work, but seemed to spend so much time waiting for workers to hook on to large concrete slabs large enough to be lifted. Most of the crumbled reinforced concrete was being dug away by the army of volunteers.

Everyone's mouth and nose was covered to avoid the stench the odor of rotting corpses below the rubble. But still the closer we came to the crumpled mass of concrete, the stronger the odor became.

### 2,000 buried

It was here at the apartment building named Nuevo Leon where people worked to exhaustion with the fleeting hope of pulling relatives out alive. Many had been rescued, but as each hour passed, the possibility of finding more buried alive grew slimmer. Estimates ranging as high as 2,000 people still buried were expressed.

The huge and powerful lights set up for emergency lit up the night like daytime on an Acapulco beach. However, the mood was considerably different. Red Cross tents near the perimeter held doctors and nurses inoculating everyone against tetanus and typhoid.

Literally thousands stood to await their turn to relieve the army of volunteers on top of the rubble. Working in shifts, those below awaited word that more



Rescue workers evacuate the injured in a damaged area of downtown Mexico City following the recent earthquake in Mexico City. The quake, which registered almost 8 on the Richter scale, left thousands dead and millions homeless. — Canapress Photo Service

hands were needed above. There was little we could do, so we left to find a disaster site perhaps less spectacular, but more in need of our help. We had only to travel to Rio Lerma in the Colonia Juarez district to find the Hotel Romano, a hotel well-known to Canadian tour operators.

### Eerie scene

Like all other areas affected by the quake, the strangeness of the destruction was apparent. Across from what was formally the Hotel Romano, a building considerably older than the hotel, stood unscathed. Designated as dangerous, no one was allowed in, but at least the outward appearance seemed unaffected.

For two hours we helped to clear carpet, pieces of furniture, mattresses and concrete, throwing it down to the street below for an Army caterpillar to load into a waiting truck. This was driven only a block away or so and dumped in the street. French doctors stood and waited for injured people to be pulled from the building as four had been only nine hours before.

I spoke to a Mexican obviously nearing exhaustion who had been digging since Thursday. Tired and dirty, his frustration was apparent as he told me of the poor organization.

Volunteers, usually relatives with all the best intentions, scrambled up on the top of the rubble, clawing away at concrete and bricks, sending debris tumbling down below covering up other openings into the center and tunnels into the hotel lobby.

### Phone worked

After the destruction, one man had used the phone miraculously still working to call outside the lobby and advise that amid the dead bodies of many less fortunate, he and five others were still alive.

They were later rescued. The work continued as men attempted with acetylene torches to cut through the reinforcing rods of concrete. This was a task that seemed to take forever before any progress could be made.

Through the 1 a.m. streets we travelled, streets closed off to all but emergency vehicles, police and army. Blocks and blocks where no one even lay sleeping in the buildings, buildings still standing and apparently untouched, but sealed off by the army for fear of their toppling. The whole scene had the eerie appearance and feeling of a scene out of the old Twilight Zone television series.

Our final stop that night was one forced upon us by circumstances. As we passed along Avenida Chilpancingo, a Red Cross worker flagged us down at the sight where my brother-in-law's girlfriend's relatives had died. They were about to uncover more bodies and asked if we would take two in the back of the pick-up to a local site set up for identification.

### Odor overpowering

As we stopped, we saw two caskets on the street brought by relatives to take away their loved ones

so they would not be carted off to mass graves. The girls waited in the cab as Pablo, Andres and I were given gloves to climb up on top and pull bodies out and carry them back to the truck.

No question existed that we would find cadavers and not live people as we were now five days after the quake. The odor was absolutely overpowering. Even though we wore masks with scarves tied over them, the sickening stench almost gagged us as we climbed up to where a jack hammer drowned out everything else. The diesel fumes from the crane were a welcome breath of fresh air.

However, the workmen had underestimated the time it would take to reach the bodies. For three hours we waited as the sledgehammers and pick axes battered away. Finally, a hole big enough for a worker with a lamp to peer into the cavity below. The half-buried form of a corpse confirmed what everyone already knew.

### Crushed cars

Exhausted from the long night, we were finally sent away as more volunteers arrived. As I stumbled down from the top of what must have been the eighth floor, I reached down and picked up a small blue toy truck, not unlike one my own son, safe, at home in bed, would play with. I leaped down on what I soon realized was a mangled Volkswagen Rabbit. Many other cars lay twisted beyond recognition nearby. The force of what had happened was just incomprehensible.

Later that day we heard more. See Infants P-10



LAWRENCE ELLIOTT Visited the disaster