

Destruction from Mexico City earthquake may not be over



Getty Images

MEXICO CITY — As many as 360 buildings and homes are in danger of collapse or with major damage in Mexico City nearly a week after a magnitude-7.1 earthquake collapsed 38 structures.

The risk of delayed collapse is real: The cupola of Our Lady of Angels Church, damaged and cracked by the Sept. 19 quake, split in half and crashed to the ground Sunday evening. There were no injuries.

Nervous neighbors continued calling police Monday as apparently new cracks appeared in their apartment buildings or existing ones worsened, even as the city struggled to get back to normality.

Education Secretary Aurelio Nuno said Monday that officials had cleared only 676 of Mexico City's nearly 9,000 schools to reopen Tuesday and said it could be two to three weeks before all are declared safe, leaving hundreds of thousands of children idle.

Mexico City Mayor Miguel Angel Mancera said at least seven schools were among the buildings thought to be at risk of tumbling.

The frustrations of families with loved ones missing boiled over Monday night at the largest remaining search site, a collapsed seven-story office building.

"What are they hiding from us," asked Javier Saucedo, father of 27-year-old Angel Javier Saucedo, who worked in the building. He complained that authorities have been removing bodies from the site without letting families know.

"Why does our own government toy with the pain of the families," he said. "What they are doing is not fair." He called for President Enrique Peña Nieto and the mayor to come to the site and clear things up for them.

At several points in the city, employees gathered on sidewalks in front of their workplaces Monday, refusing to enter because they feared their buildings could collapse.

“We are afraid for our own safety,” said Maribel Martinez Ramirez, an employee of a government development agency who, along with dozens of co-workers, refused to enter. “The building is leaning, there are cracks.”

Mancera said 360 “red level” buildings would either have to be demolished or receive major structural reinforcement. An additional 1,136 are reparable, and 8,030 buildings inspected so far were found to be habitable.

Search teams were still digging through dangerous piles of rubble, hoping against the odds to find survivors. The city has accounted for 186 of the 326 dead nationwide.

The smell of rotting corpses increasingly hung over the largest remaining search site near the city’s center.

Juan Carlos Penas, in charge of a Spanish rescue team working at the remains of what had been a seven-story office building, said Monday that the work was very slow because the rubble was so unstable. Rescuers managed to make a small entry between the second and third floors and insert a camera, but they did not immediately find anyone.

While no one has been found alive since last Wednesday, relatives of the trapped, anxious to cling to any hope of rescue, won injunctions against actions that could cause the ruins to collapse further.

The federal judiciary council said Sunday that court injunctions for seven points around the city prevent authorities from using backhoes or bulldozers to remove rubble, in order to allow “search and rescue operations to continue ... to preserve the life of people who may be among the remains of the structures.”

Hugo Luna, whose cousin Erika Gabriela Albarran was believed trapped in the fallen office building, complained that officials had not immediately informed families when two bodies were removed Saturday night. “There is a lot of distrust of authorities,” he said.

His aunt, who was also inside the building when the quake hit but escaped, is traumatized, he said.

“Nothing happened to her, but now she has panic attacks,” Luna said. “You open the door, she hears a noise and she gets scared.”

Mariana Castilla, a volunteer social psychologist, said rumors and a lack of information were difficult for families of the missing.

One by one, other searches have closed down in recent days, after sniffer dogs were sent in and didn't find life and thermal imaging devices turned up no body heat signatures. Heavy machinery moved in to begin removing the mountains of debris. Empty lots began to appear where just days ago a building stood.

At the site of a collapsed factory that held various businesses near the city center, the rubble had already been cleared, leaving behind the concrete foundation. People left flowers Monday in memory of those who perished there.

Source:

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