

# Earthquake tragedy compounds social misery in poverty-stricken Colombia

By Jerry White  
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In the aftermath of Monday's earthquake, which devastated cities and towns across Colombia's coffee growing region, thousands of working class and poor residents reacted in anger over delays in government relief. They have ransacked food stores and other locations and clashed with soldiers and police in a desperate search for food and water. President Andres Pastrana has responded by dispatching 2,000 soldiers and 700 extra police to the area.

According to rescue workers, virtually no basic emergency aid has reached the disaster areas, days after the earthquake. International relief agencies say food distribution systems have broken down and that insufficient supplies have been airlifted into the disaster zone.

The quake's epicenter was located just 15 miles west of Armenia in Valle del Cauca state. The quake also damaged towns and hamlets in neighboring Quindio, Tolima, and Risaralda states. The number known to have died has risen to nearly 900, with more than 3,400 injured. But with less than 25 percent of the rubble removed government officials and rescuers fear the final death toll could be well over 2,000.

Armenia, a city of 300,000 about 100 miles west of the capital of Bogota, absorbed the brunt of the quake. Two-thirds of the city's buildings were rendered uninhabitable and an estimated 180,000 people were made homeless. By Wednesday more than 500 corpses were recovered. In addition, over 2,000 residents were reported injured, but many had been turned away from overflowing hospitals and clinics.

In the city's working class neighborhoods, homes made of wood, decaying cement and cinderblock, built on unstable ground, were flattened. Only the northern section of the city, where the wealthy live in well-built apartments, was left largely unscathed. "It was an

earthquake of the poor," Risaralda Governor Carlos Arturo Lopez told reporters.

There was no electricity or running water in most of the city, and food was in dangerously short supply. Many residents were wandering around the city looking for loved ones. Because of a shortage of coffins, many relatives were either forced to pay \$1,500 a casket on the flourishing black market or were simply unable to bury the dead. Many corpses were being laid out on plastic sheets at Armenia's sports stadium. Officials appealed for refrigerated trucks and generators for hospitals to stop bodies from decomposing and keep a possible epidemic at bay.

Residents in the heavily damaged working class neighborhoods desperately raided food stores searching for edibles and water. Some residents threw rocks at police, who responded by firing bursts of automatic gunfire into the air. "Our children are hungry," said a woman at the head of one protest. "And we don't know if this situation is more painful than the government's laziness [in getting aid]," she added, complaining that authorities have ignored them since the quake struck.

Crowds of thousands engulfed the entire downtown area and looting continued even as aftershocks rattled the crumbling buildings. "No food has arrived, we've been forced to rob this," said Jose Fernandez, as he emerged from one store. "I haven't eaten since the quake," he added, as he and others lugged crates of soda, bags of potatoes and boxes of detergent.

Chants of "We want food, not bullets" were heard in some areas of the city where angry residents outnumbered police and soldiers, who responded by firing automatic assault rifles. Secret service agents from the notorious National Security Department (DIS) fired machine guns and pistols to stop the protesters. The government imposed a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew to

prevent looting, even though it hindered rescue efforts.

In the wealthy area of the city, police urged affluent residents to establish vigilante groups. "We have asked citizens to set up security fronts in their neighborhoods because they were being terrorized by groups of three or four people," one police captain said. "We gave them the direction, but it was their decision to arm themselves." The vigilante groups, which gathered on street corners around campfires, were armed with an array of machetes, shotguns, pistols and even Molotov cocktails.

"We haven't got enough people to control this situation," said Gen. Teodoro Campo, Colombia's fourth highest-ranking police officer from Armenia. "People are calling for food and we cannot resolve that by beating them with nightsticks."

President Andres Pastrana canceled plans to fly to Munich to meet with World Bank officials and instead traveled to Armenia. Speaking to reporters at the airport late Wednesday, President Pastrana said he had arrived to personally take charge of the relief operation and would stay in the city for about three days. "I have come to impose order.... We will work to resolve the problems and distribute food adequately to avoid what happened today," he said.

Colombia, the third most populous country in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico, has a poverty rate of 52 percent. This has been intensified by the restructuring program imposed by Western financial institutions for the repayment of the country's more than \$20 billion in foreign debt. In addition, the county has been hard-hit by falling commodity prices, above all on its coffee crop, which accounts for \$2.1 billion, about half of the country's exports. Unemployment is at its highest level this decade.

Pledges for aid from around the world have been minimal, including \$1 million from the European Union and \$10 million from the Inter-American Development Bank. The US is providing blankets and plastic sheeting worth \$2 million.

Helena Olea, from the Colombian Commission of Jurists in Bogota, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. She said, "There is a vast difference between how the poor and the wealthier areas were affected. Most houses in the Colombia are made of bricks, but in the poor neighborhoods they are made of wood and other substandard material, and these collapsed. Also,

although there are building codes for safe construction, these are not enforced.

"The five departments or states which were affected have poverty rates of 50 percent or more. In this area many of those who picked coffee with their hands for years have been affected by the falling prices and have been forced to leave. Most of those who had jobs in Armenia do things like working in restaurants and shops, or repairing cars.

"Due to the deficit and the budget there has been a slowdown in many of the government programs that could have helped in an emergency. There is much donated food in Bogota, but it hasn't been distributed well. The government has been unable to set up camps to assess the needs of the people and provide aid. Instead people are staying in the streets.

"Because of the reduction in the national budget, there are far fewer people employed in government development programs for the poor. The country was not prepared for this. There should have been a budget for the national centers to monitor where the earthquakes hit and how strong they were, but half of the country's 26 centers were not operating."

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