

# Peru mobilizes after major earthquake

**The death toll is far lower than in similar-magnitude quakes, such as one in 1970 that killed 70,000.**

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**LIMA, PERU** - Peru's government mobilized relief and rescue efforts Thursday as the death toll from Wednesday night's massive earthquake rose steadily.

At press time, Peru's civil defense agency reported that more than 300 people were killed and close to 1,500 injured as a result of the 8.0-magnitude earthquake, which was centered in the ocean about 90 miles south of the country's capital, Lima.

The hardest-hit areas were more than 150 miles south of Lima. Many of the deaths were registered in the city of Ica, where numerous buildings collapsed.

Nearly 200 people in one of the cities closest to the quake's epicenter, Pisco, were trapped under the rubble of a Roman Catholic church, which crumbled during evening mass.

Pisco Mayor Juan Mendoza told the state news agency Andina that approximately 20 percent of buildings in his city were destroyed.

Crisostomo Palma, a housing contractor in the town of San Vicente de Cañete, which is also close to the epicenter, said people were confused immediately following the earthquake.

"People came running out of their houses, screaming and trying to understand what was happening. Some of the older, adobe-brick houses collapsed," he said in a telephone interview, adding that the damage there is not as severe as in other towns.

Residents in the nearby fishing port of Cerro Azul left their homes when waves began crashing over the seawall.

## **Tsunami concerns triggered**

Tsunami alerts were issued for Peru and most Pacific Basin countries in the region overnight. The threat did not materialize, but residents in Cerro Azul remain on alert.

"People headed to the tops of nearby hills, fearing a tidal wave. There is still a lot of panic because of the aftershocks," added Mr. Palma.

Peru's National Geophysical Institute has reported close to 150 aftershocks since the initial earthquake, which hit at 6:40 p.m. local time Wednesday (7:40 p.m. EDT). }

Stronger aftershocks followed quickly after the earthquake, with magnitudes close to 6 on the Richter scale.

The Peruvian government began to mobilize immediately, with President Alan Garcia addressing the nation and dispatching cabinet ministers to the hardest-hit areas. He ordered schools closed so that they could be inspected and dispatched the country's 100,000 police officers to hard-hit areas.

Segments of the Pan-American Highway, which runs the length of the Peruvian coast, were knocked out by the temblor, complicating relief efforts. Another developing problem in Ica is the escape of dozens of inmates from the Tambo de Mora prison. Police officers are actively rounding up escapees. Pisco's mayor also lamented that thieves were taking advantage of the crisis to loot damaged homes and stores.

### **Rush to provide tents, water, and food**

Electricity was out in Ica and parts of Lima department, including the capital, and the country's telephone system collapsed immediately after the earthquake. Service was restored after several hours, but remained spotty.

President Garcia took the country's telecom companies to task during his address and Communication Minister Veronica Zavala announced emergency meetings with the major telecom providers to figure out what went wrong and fix it.

Production Minister Rafael Rey, who is coordinating part of the aid, said the immediate needs are tents, water, and food.

"We have been in constant contact with authorities and coordinating efforts. We are responding as quickly as possible to minimize this tragedy," said Mr. Rey in a telephone interview.

Garcia also expressed the sentiments of many Peruvians, saying that while the death and destruction is tragic, Peru was spared a disaster of much greater proportions.

"Thank you, God Almighty, that these terrible earthquakes did not cause death tolls like in years past," said Garcia.

He was referring to a 1970 earthquake in the central highlands that killed more than 70,000 people. The death toll for an earthquake of this magnitude is also relatively low compared with other major temblors in recent years.

The 7.6-magnitude earthquake in Pakistan and India in October 2005, for example, killed 73,276 people and left more than 100,000 injured.