

Government's earthquake relief in Peru not enough, say experts

Relief experts say that local aid delivery is falling short.

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PISCO, PERU - Manuel Doroteo was on the road this weekend, leaving what was left of his home here on the Peruvian coast after it was leveled by last week's magnitude 8 earthquake.

Mr. Doroteo remained in Pisco, the city hit hardest by the quake, when the rest of his family quickly relocated 140 miles north to the capital, Lima. But after going a few days without water or electricity and sleeping in a tent, Doroteo decided to pack up and join the family.

"This has been like a terror movie. There is nothing and I got tired of waiting for water to arrive. The government handed out beans and rice, but people have no way of cooking them," he said, waiting at three-hour traffic jam to get past a section of highway knocked out by the earthquake.

Like many of the nearly 100,000 people forced from their homes by Peru's worst earthquake in 37 years, Doroteo faults the government for not doing enough to get aid to victims.

Indeed, the sight of people standing in long lines for water and blankets, complaining that they are being neglected, belies the massive amount of aid and the frenetic pace at which President Alan Garcia and ministers have managed the crisis. The federal government has succeeded in getting plenty of aid to the areas hit hardest, but its centralized control of the crisis has hampered the speed of aid delivery to individuals on the ground, say relief experts. The government blames distribution delays on the scale of the damage to infrastructure in the wake of the earthquake and its aftershocks.

"No matter what we do, people will complain. This is understandable, because they are living through a tragedy and want assistance," says Women's Issues and Social Development Minister Virginia Borra, who is coordinating the arrival of supplies and overseeing state-sponsored soup kitchens and daycare centers. "We are proving aid, but they want more."

President Garcia takes charge

The president has set up his command post in Pisco, holding cabinet meetings, handing out orders to relief workers, and taking the time to check in on a child born in the midst of the rubble.

Hundreds of tons of food, clothing, and supplies have been airlifted and driven into Pisco, a clearing house for aid for the rest of the Ica department, where more than 500 people were killed and more than 1,500 injured. There were 19 cargo planes and transport helicopters lined up at one point at the city's small airport on Saturday, unloading supplies from foreign governments and international organizations.

Emergency decrees signed by Mr. Garcia are providing families of the dead with caskets and \$300 for funeral arrangements. People whose homes were destroyed or seriously damaged will receive \$1,900 in seed money to start rebuilding. Other decrees have eased customs rules to make incoming aid move more quickly, and controls over spending have loosened to facilitate the rebuilding process. Foreign aid workers say the problem is not a lack of supplies or government will, but the decision to put federal politicians in charge of logistical operations.

"There is not a lack of resources, but tremendous bottlenecks in getting aid to people who need it," says Aaron Skrocki, who manages emergency programs for US-based Catholic Relief Services.

Replacing local officials with ministers

"Local authorities, the ones who know the area best, and titular head of the civil defense system, have no role. They have been replaced by ministers," said Frank Boeren, of relief specialist with Oxfam International.

Government authorities say the criticism is unwarranted. They fault the slow pace with the magnitude of the damage.

Nearly 80 percent of homes in the Pisco area are in ruins. Of 91 government-run daycare centers in the city, only one remains standing, and most schools are destroyed or damaged. The Pan-American Highway, which connects Peru's major cities along the coast, will require costly repairs in several sections.

The government has opened 14 temporary shelters in Pisco and seven in Chincha, and plans to add a few more to get people out of tents or away from their crumbled and unsafe homes.

Authorities are also facing a security threat from mobs that have attacked aid convoys to steal supplies. There have also been incidents of looting in Pisco and nearby towns.

"Security is the principal concern at this point," said Defense Minister Allan Wagner.

President Garcia sent 1,000 troops to stop the looting, but concerns have been magnified by claims that some of the violence is coming at the hands of more than 600 inmates who walked out of the Tambo de Mora prison in the nearby town of Chincha after some of its walls collapsed. Only a handful of the convicts have been rearrested.

The back-and-forth argument over emergency aid is likely to sharpen as the dust settles and the reconstruction phase gets under way.

The task will be daunting. A helicopter fly-over of the zone shows a swath of destruction stretching nearly 200 miles down the coast and into the foothills of the Andean mountain range. The most significant damage is in coastal areas and stretches inland to towns located around 1,000 feet above sea level.

"We have walked nearly every street in Pisco and there is not one where the homes are intact," says Alex Falconi, a regional government inspector. "We are talking about total reconstruction."