

# Peru's president put to test in quake

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LIMA, Peru --

An earthquake that leveled towns in southern Peru was the first big test of the presidency of Alan Garcia, one of Washington's top allies in Latin America.

The president spent four straight nights sleeping by candlelight in Pisco, the hardest-hit city, and saw his approval ratings skyrocket. But he could be in trouble as disorganization in the relief effort becomes increasingly obvious.

"The chaos is among the worst I've seen, and I've been in nine earthquakes," said Pedro Frutos, head of a team of Spanish firefighters that helped search for survivors.

Garcia traveled quickly to Pisco after the Aug. 15 quake and was on the streets until after midnight, assigning tasks to Cabinet ministers, overseeing food and water distribution and coordinating lodging for the thousands of homeless.

He met with foreign rescue teams to thank them for their help. He urged survivors to be patient, assuring them: "No one is going die from thirst and no one is going to die from hunger." He witnessed the birth of a boy in a tent hospital, cuddling the newborn and proclaiming: "He is a message of hope in the midst of death and pain."

Garcia had seen his approval rating drop from 63 percent to 35 percent in his first year in office. But an Apoyo poll published Sunday gave the 58-year-old president a 76 percent approval rating for his conduct since the earthquake. The poll had a margin of error of 4.4 percentage points.

"Even though I don't like Alan, I recognize that he has been present in the city during this painful time," said Maria Campos, 34, whose brother-in-law was killed and her sister injured when a wall collapsed at their home in Pisco.

Despite Garcia's feverish micromanagement - or perhaps because of it - it took far too long to set up distribution points for the tons of aid that poured in from across Peru and abroad. The delay prompted looting, which forced Garcia to send in troops.

Sergio Alvarez, a coordinator for Oxfam International, said government ministers with no expertise in disaster relief were being given important assignments for which they were not prepared. And mayors and foreign relief officials say Garcia needs to step aside and let local officials take charge of organizing aid.

Some residents of the disaster area also say Garcia, who at 6-foot-4 projects an imperial air, may have posed for the cameras but never really got involved. Pisco fisherman Ramiro Aguirre recalled former President Alberto Fujimori, an engineer by training who would roll up his sleeves and grab a shovel when disaster struck.

"Fujimori would get dirty. Alan is stuck up," Aguirre said. "He doesn't mix with the people. He orders others to do the work."

But Garcia, who served a five-year term as president in the 1980s, is an experienced politician and knows people need to feel their government is coming through in times of crisis. He has offered money to rebuild homes, and this week announced creation of 8,000 temporary jobs for residents to help in the cleanup.

Garcia, one of President Bush's strongest backers on free trade in Latin America, may find the reconstruction of southern Peru as the defining measure of his presidency.

"On one side, in his favor, is his immediate response putting himself in charge of the crisis and identifying with the survivors," said public opinion analyst Manuel Saavedra. "On the other side of the scales is the ineffectiveness of the government in helping the people most hurt."