

Death toll rises to 61 in Mexico earthquake

By MARK STEVENSON
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — One of the most powerful earthquakes ever recorded in Mexico struck off the country's southern coast, toppling hundreds of buildings and sending panicked people fleeing into the streets in the middle of the night. At least 61 people were reported dead.

The quake that hit minutes before midnight Thursday was strong enough to cause buildings to sway violently in the capital city more than 650 miles away. As beds banged against walls, people still wearing pajamas ran out of their homes and gathered in frightened groups.

Rodrigo Soberanes, who lives near San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, the state nearest the epicenter, said his house "moved like chewing gum."

The furious shaking created a second national emergency for Mexican agencies already bracing for Hurricane Katia on the other side of the country. The system was expected to strike the Gulf coast in the state of Veracruz late Friday or early Saturday as a Category 2 storm that could bring life-threatening floods.

President Enrique Pena Nieto said Friday evening in a televised address that 61 people were killed — 45 in Oaxaca state, 12 in Chiapas and 4 in Tabasco — and he declared three days of national mourning.

The worst-hit city was Juchitan, on the narrow waist of Oaxaca known as the Isthmus, where 36 quake victims died.

About half of Juchitan's city hall collapsed in a pile of rubble and streets were littered with the debris of ruined houses. A hospital also collapsed, Pena Nieto said after touring the city and meeting with residents. The patients were relocated to other facilities.

The president said authorities were working to re-establish the supply of water and food and provide medical attention to those who need it. He vowed the government would help people rebuild and called for people to come together.

"The power of this earth-



Soldiers remove debris from a partly collapsed municipal building felled by a massive earthquake in Juchitan, Oaxaca state, Mexico, Friday. One of the most powerful earthquakes ever to strike Mexico has hit off its southern Pacific coast, killing at least 32 people, toppling houses, government offices and businesses.

AP Photo/Luis Alberto Cruz



Residents walk past boats that were moved on land in preparation for the expected arrival of Hurricane Katia, in Tecolotla, Veracruz state, Mexico, Friday. Hurricane Katia in the Gulf of Mexico is stationary north-northeast of Veracruz and forecasters didn't expect much movement overnight.

AP Photo/Eduardo Verdugo

quake was devastating, but we are certain that the power of unity, the power of solidarity and the power of shared responsibility will be greater," Pena Nieto said.

Mexico City escaped major damage, but the quake terrified sleeping residents, many of whom still remember the catastrophic 1985 earthquake that killed thousands and devastated large parts of the city.

Families were jerked awake by the grating howl of the capital's seismic alarm. Some shouted as they dashed out of rocking apartment buildings. Even the iconic Angel of Independence Monument swayed as the

quake's waves rolled through the city's soft soil.

Elsewhere, the extent of destruction was still emerging. Hundreds of buildings collapsed or were damaged, power was cut at least briefly to more than 1.8 million people and authorities closed schools Friday in at least 11 states to check them for safety.

The Interior Department reported that 428 homes were destroyed and 1,700 were damaged in various cities and towns in Chiapas.

"Homes made of clay tiles and wood collapsed," said Nataniel Hernandez, a human rights worker living in Tonalá, Chiapas, who warned that inclement weather threatened

to bring more down.

"Right now it is raining very hard in Tonalá, and with the rains it gets much more complicated because the homes were left very weak, with cracks," Hernandez said by phone.

The earthquake's impact was blunted somewhat by the fact that it was centered 100 miles offshore. It hit off Chiapas' Pacific coast, near the Guatemalan border, with a magnitude of 8.1 — equal to Mexico's strongest quake of the past century. It was slightly stronger than the 1985 quake, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

The epicenter was in a seismic hotspot in the Pacific where one tectonic plate dives under another. These subduction zones are responsible for producing some of the biggest quakes in history, including the 2011 Fukushima disaster and the 2004 Sumatra quake that spawned a deadly tsunami.

The quake struck at 11:49 p.m. Thursday. Its epicenter was 102 miles west of Tapachula in Chiapas, with a depth of 43.3 miles, the USGS said.

Dozens of strong aftershocks rattled the region in the following hours.

Three people were killed in San Cristobal, including two women who died when a house and a wall collapsed, Chiapas Gov. Manuel Velasco said.

Irma bears down on Florida, 5M told to flee coast

MIAMI (AP) — Irma trained its sights on Florida and officials warned more than 5 million people that time was running out Friday to evacuate ahead of the deadly hurricane as it followed a path that could take it from one end of the state to the other.

By early evening, Irma was a slightly weakened Category 4 storm with winds of 155 mph and forecasters said it could be back up to Category 5 when it comes ashore near Key West on Sunday morning.

Forecasters adjusted the storm's potential track more toward the west coast of Florida, away from the Miami metropolitan area of 6 million people, meaning "a less costly, a less deadly storm," University of Miami researcher Brian McNoldy said.

Nevertheless, forecasters warned that its hurricane-force winds were so wide they could reach from coast to coast, testing the nation's third-largest state, which has undergone rapid development and more stringent hurricane-proof building codes in the last decade or so.

"This is a storm that will kill you if you don't get out of the way," National Hurricane Center meteorologist Dennis Feltgen said. "Everybody's going to feel this one."

Irma killed at least 20 people in the Caribbean and left thousands homeless as it devastated small resort islands known for their warm, turquoise water.

In Florida, gas shortages and gridlock plagued the evacuations, turning normally simple trips into tests of will. Parts of interstates 75 and 95 north were bumper-to-bumper, while very few cars drove on the southbound lanes.

"We're getting out of this state," said Manny Zuniga, who left his home in Miami at midnight Thursday to avoid the gridlock. "Irma is going to take all of Florida."

Despite driving overnight,



Ryan Kaye loads sandbags into his truck at a makeshift filling station provided by the county as protection ahead of Hurricane Irma, Friday in Palm Coast, Fla.

AP Photo/David Goldman

he still took 12 hours to reach Orlando — a trip that normally takes four hours. From there, he and his wife, two children, two dogs and a ferret were headed to Arkansas.

In one of the country's largest evacuations, about 5.6 million people in Florida — more than one-quarter of the state's population — were ordered to evacuate and another 540,000 were told to leave the Georgia coast. Authorities opened hundreds of shelters for people who did not leave. Hotels as far away as Atlanta filled up with evacuees.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott said people fleeing could drive slowly in the shoulder lane on highways. He hasn't reversed the southbound lanes because he said they were needed to deliver gas and supplies.

"If you are planning to leave and do not leave tonight, you will have to ride out this extremely dangerous storm at your own risk," Scott said.

Tony Marcellus racked his brain to figure out a way to get his 67-year-old mother and 85-year-old grandfather out of their home five blocks from the ocean in West Palm Beach. He lives 600 miles away in Atlanta. He checked flights but found nothing and rental cars were sold out, so he

settled on a modern method of evacuation.

He hired an Uber to pick them up and drive them 170 miles to Orlando, where he met them to take them to Atlanta. He gave the driver a nice tip.

"I have peace of mind now," said Marcellus' mother, Celine Jean. "I've been worried sick for days."

Several small, poor communities around Lake Okechobee in the south-central part of Florida were added to the evacuation list because the lake may overflow — but the governor said engineers expect the protective dike to hold up. Many people in the area said they wouldn't leave because they either had no transportation or nowhere to go.

Disney World parks will close early Saturday and remain shuttered through Monday, as will Universal Orlando and Sea World.

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez said he planned for enough space to hold 100,000 people before the storm arrives, although most shelters were only beginning to fill on Friday.

Hurricane Andrew in 1992 revealed how lax building codes had become in the country's most storm-prone state,

"This is a storm that will kill you if you don't get out of the way. Everybody's going to feel this one."

— Dennis Feltgen, National Hurricane Center meteorologist

and Florida began requiring sturdier construction. Now, experts say a monstrosity strong Irma could become the most serious test of Florida's storm-worthiness since then.

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