
Ecuador earthquake death toll climbs to 350, including 2 Canadians

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But the gathering ended in tragedy when a collapsing building crushed 17-year-old Sayira Quinde, her mother, father and toddler brother in their rusting Chevy Blazer.

A grief-stricken aunt, Johana Estupinan, now is making the longest journey of her life in a funeral hearse to the town of Esmeraldas, where she will bury her loved ones and break the news of the loss to her sister's three now-orphaned children.

As Ecuador digs out from its strongest earthquake in decades, tales of devastating loss are everywhere amid the rubble. The 7.8-magnitude earthquake left a trail of ruin along Ecuador's normally placid Pacific Ocean coast, buckling highways, knocking down an air traffic control tower and flattening homes and buildings. At least 350 people died, including [two Canadians](#), and thousands are homeless.

President Rafael Correa said early Monday that the death toll would "surely rise, and in a considerable way."

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"The Ecuadorean spirit knows how to move forward, and will know how to overcome these very difficult moments," Correa said.

Portoviejo, a provincial capital of nearly 300,000, was among the hardest hit, with the town's mayor reporting at least 100 deaths. The Quinde family drove there from their home hours north up the coast to drop off Sayira at Estupinan's house a week before she was to start classes at a public university on a scholarship to study medicine.

"She was my favourite niece," Estupinan said, emotionally torn apart after waiting at the city's morgue for hours. "I thought I was getting a daughter for the six years it was going to take her to earn a degree."

"I never thought my life would be destroyed in a minute," she added.

Estupinan watched as her loved ones were loaded onto a truck-sized hearse for the nighttime drive, the three older ones in dark mahogany coffins and 8-month-old Matias in a casket painted white. "It was supposed to be a short moment of family happiness but it converted into a tragedy," she said.

She hoped to bury her relatives in Esmeraldas on Monday, but devastation there is also severe and she worried about whether the hearse could make it along roads ripped apart by the quake.

The Saturday night quake knocked out power in many parts along the coast and some who fled to higher ground fearing a tsunami had no home to return to, or feared structures still standing might collapse. The country's Geophysics Institute said it recorded 230 aftershocks, some strong, as of Sunday night.

With makeshift shelters in short supply, many hunkered down to spend a second straight night outdoors huddled among neighbours.

READ MORE: [2 Canadians among 246 Ecuador earthquake victims](#)

Correa cut short a trip to the Vatican and flew directly to the city of Manta to oversee relief efforts. Even before touching Ecuadorean soil he signed a decree declaring a national emergency. Speaking from Portoviejo late Sunday he said the earthquake was the worst natural disaster to hit Ecuador since a 1949 earthquake in the Andean city of Ambato, which took over 5,000 lives.

"Our grief is very large, the tragedy is very large, but we'll find the way to move forward," Correa said. "If our pain is immense, still larger is the spirit of our people."

As rescuers scrambled through the ruins near the epicenter, in some cases digging with their hands to look for survivors, humanitarian aid began trickling in. More than 3,000 packages of food and nearly 8,000 sleeping kits were being delivered Sunday. Correa's ally, Venezuela, and neighbouring Colombia, where the quake was also felt, organized airlifts. Mexico and Chile sent teams of rescuers.



Homes destroyed after Ecuador earthquake

Spain's Red Cross said as many as 5,000 people may need temporary housing after the quake flattened homes, and 100,000 may need some sort of aid.

"For God's sake help me find my family," pleaded Manuel Quijije, 27, standing next to a wrecked building in Portoviejo. He said his older brother, Junior, was trapped under a pile of twisted steel and concrete with two relatives.

"We managed to see his arms and legs. They're his, they're buried, but the police kicked us out because they say there's a risk the rest of the building will collapse," Quijije said angrily as he looked on the ruins cordoned off by police. "We're not afraid. We're desperate. We want to pull out our family."

On social media, Ecuadoreans celebrated a video of a baby girl being pulled from beneath a collapsed home in Manta.

But fear was also spreading of another night of looting after 180 prisoners from a jail near Portoviejo escaped amid the tumult. Authorities said some 20 inmates were recaptured and some others returned voluntarily.

Seeking security from any unrest, about 400 residents of Portoviejo gathered Sunday night on the tarmac of the city's main airport, where authorities handed out water, mattresses and food. The airport was closed in 2011 and flights diverted to a larger facility in nearby Manta after Correa kicked out a U.S. drug interdiction operation stationed there.

Shantytowns and cheaply constructed brick and concrete homes were reduced to rubble along the quake's path. In the coastal town of Chamanga, authorities estimated that 90 per cent of homes had damage, while in Guayaquil a shopping centre's roof fell in and a collapsed highway overpass crushed a car, killing the driver.

The government said it would draw on \$600 million in emergency funding from multilateral banks to rebuild.

But in the meantime, the digging and hoping against the odds continued.

In downtown Portoviejo, a few blocks from where a four-story hotel fell onto the Quinde family's car, the six-story social security building was a pile of debris. Downed power cables were strewn across the street.

"The situation is heart-rending," Jaime Ugalde, editor of *El Diario*, the city's most-important newspaper, said as he

surveyed the damage. "I'm going to return home and hug my wife and two kids. We're the lucky ones. We're alive."
