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Mexico landslide turns out to be false alarm

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The Tuesday landslide in Mexico's state of Oaxaca that mobilized the nation's military and federal government for potentially hundreds of fatalities turns out to be much less devastating than initially thought.

In fact, as of Wednesday, there are no confirmed deaths. Eleven people are listed as missing so far. Ken Ellingwood, reporting from Oaxaca City, and Tracy Wilkinson note that only a few homes were said to have been destroyed or damaged.

Those figures contrast significantly from Gov. Ulises Ruiz's original estimate that hundreds of homes were buried in the landslide in the village of Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec and, as his government said at one point, up to 1,000 could be missing or dead ([link in Spanish](#)).

The radically altered damage and death figures in this case illustrate the always-dicey nature of gathering information on a breaking news event in a remote area, both for officials and the reporters who relay their statements to the public.

In the initial hours since word of the landslide reached beyond the village, access to Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec was severely hampered by damaged roads, yet officials appear to have spread the highest estimate possible of damage. In the minute-by-minute news world, this generated an atmosphere where media organizations, including The Times, scrambled to send reporters to the area.

The Mexico City daily El Universal, in Spanish, narrates how the incident played out, calling Tuesday a day of "national confusion."

Now the head of Oaxaca's state firefighters is threatening to sue the communal authorities in Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec who first alerted the state civil protection agency about the landslide (link in Spanish). Manuel Maza Sanchez, the state's fire agency director, says the landslide false alarm "distracted" firefighters from other areas also in need of attention as Oaxaca and the entire southern Mexico and Central American region continue to recover from persistent rain and major storms.

-- Daniel Hernandez in Mexico City

Photo: A view of the landslide in the Oaxacan community of Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec.

Credit: Reuters