

The 1985 Mexico City earthquake, remembered

Daniel Hernandez, Los Angeles Times, 9-20-10

Mexico City on Sunday marked 25 years since a powerful earthquake devastated the Mexican capital, killing thousands and sparking a grassroots civilian rescue effort that helped lead to the demise of the one-party state.

The magnitude 8.1 quake shook Mexico City at 7:19 a.m. on Sept. 19, 1985, lasting between three and five minutes. It toppled hundreds of buildings across the densely settled former lake bed, including several hospitals. An estimated 10,000 people were killed, and tens of thousands were injured or left homeless. Many children were orphaned.

Here's a YouTube clip of live Televisa newscast footage as the quake hits, where the anchor attempts to remain calm, telling viewers, *"It's shaking just a teensy bit. Don't be scared."*

The quake, which struck on Mexico's Pacific coast, exposed a crippling ineptitude in the response of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. The government seemed unprepared and unable to organize itself to respond to the quake, so ordinary people did it themselves.

There were prominent victims, such as famed rocker Rodrigo "Rockdrigo" Gonzalez, and miraculous rescues, such as the three "miracle babies" who were pulled alive from the crumbled Juarez Hospital a full seven days after the quake ([link in Spanish](#)).

The quake also exposed the endemic corruption that had come to define the PRI state. Bribery and lax oversight allowed buildings to be erected without proper earthquake safety measures. In another manner, the earthquake jolted the press in Mexico. Without a state apparatus functioning properly in the aftermath, journalists were left to fill the role of transmitting vital information as well as the growing grievances of the survivors, as this YouTube video clip demonstrates ([in Spanish](#))

Mexico City then experienced an exodus. Many middle- and upper-class families, seeing the city almost destroyed and unable to function, relocated to provincial cities and towns or to the United States.

Three years later, a rumbling electoral revolt suggested the PRI would finally lose power, partly because of outrage over the earthquake response. But another PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, aided by almost certain vote fraud, won over leftist Cuauhtemoc Cardenas when "the system went silent," or, as most Mexicans remember it, when "the system crashed" ([link in Spanish](#)). The PRI was finally booted from power in 2000.

On Sunday, President Felipe Calderon oversaw a solemn flag ceremony on the Zocalo plaza, and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard dedicated a 25th anniversary plaque for the quake's victims at Solidarity Plaza, a small square near the Alameda Central where the Regis Hotel once stood. The famous hotel was destroyed in the earthquake.

Many of the civil rescue and neighborhood survival groups formed after the quake are still active today. One squad, Los Topos, participated in the rescue effort after Haiti's earthquake early this year ([link in Spanish](#)). Today, the city held its annual earthquake-preparedness drill, timed each year for the quake's anniversary ([link in Spanish](#)).

El Universal has an interactive multimedia gallery of quake images, audio and graphics. And here's a photo archive by the U.S. Geological Survey.

For readers interested in learning more about the 1985 earthquake, check out the books "No sin nosotros," by Carlos Monsivais; "Nada, Nadie. Las Voces del Temblor," by Elena Poniatowska; and more recently in English, the earthquake-related sections of "El Monstruo" by John Ross.