

7.2-magnitude earthquake deals blow to Calexico

Quake in Mexico -- struggling border town's historic center shattered

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Businesses already were suffering from the hard economic times on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border when Sunday's deadly 7.2-magnitude earthquake — centered about 110 miles southeast of Indio near Mexicali, Mexico — shattered storefronts, caved in roofs and caused Calexico's vital international port of entry for vehicles to shut down.

Calexico, the U.S. city hit hardest by the quake, has one of the highest unemployment rates in California, and business owners say even after they repair the damages to their stores, it could take months or longer for the economy to bounce back. Imperial County's unemployment rate is hovering at around 27 percent.

The port of entry was closed because of damage to a federal building and will not open until engineers finish inspecting it. No date was set for when the port will reopen to vehicle traffic, and for now drivers must go 10 miles out of their way to cross into the city of about 38,000 residents.

Inspectors red-tagged nearly 80 percent of the city's historic downtown area Monday. Yellow police tape lined the streets of the city's downtown littered with broken glass and fallen plaster from the prewar buildings.

City Manager Victor Carrillo said the damage will easily total millions of dollars.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proclaimed a state of emergency Monday for Imperial County, which will free up state resources to aid the recovery effort.

Aftershocks rattled the southwest Mexico-U.S. border Monday in the aftermath of the quake that killed two people in Mexico, blacked out cities and forced the evacuation of hospitals and nursing homes. It was one of the strongest earthquakes to hit the region in decades, shaking at least 20 million people.

It had a shallow depth of 6 miles. But the human toll was minimal in large part because the energy from the quake moved northwest of Mexicali toward a less populated area, said Jessica Sigala, a geophysicist from the U.S. Geological Survey.

“We were just kind of lucky that the energy went the other way,” Sigala said. “With every earthquake, the earth starts moving a certain direction. It started south of Mexicali and the rupture moved northwest.”

Building construction has also improved in northern Mexico, a region with a history of quakes, said Carlos Valdes, chief of the Mexican National Seismological Service.

“People see that it always shakes and have improved their construction capacity,” Valdes said. “Then when the construction codes are implemented, there is stricter control, especially in larger structures.”

Still, at least 45 businesses and dozens of homes were destroyed in Mexicali, a bustling commercial center along Mexico's border with California where the quake hit hardest, said Baja California state Gov. Jose Guadalupe Osuna.