

Mexico Starts Digging Out

In the aftermath of the earthquakes, rescue efforts bring grief—and small miracles.

They lined up day after day, seeking family members and friends among the disfigured and decomposing bodies that filled two tents in Mexico City's Social Security baseball stadium last week. Among the bereaved were Francisco and Pedro Ortiz García, who had worked for 72 hours to extricate the battered remains of their brother Pablo from the downtown ruins of the Commerce and Industrial Development Secretariat. While trucks, ambulances and hearses continued to deliver their grim cargoes to the makeshift morgue, the Ortiz brothers waited to formally identify the body that lay near blocks of melting ice. "We don't place blame on anybody," said Francisco. "We [only] wish to bury him as soon as possible."

Such scenes were all too common as Mexico City began digging out from the two vicious earthquakes that hit the capital two weeks ago. According to police reports, more than 4,700 people died in the catastrophe. But most private observers regarded that figure as far too low. As bone-weary rescue workers continued to comb through the wreckage, victims were beginning to be identified more by the smell of decomposition than by hard digging.

Courage: With many bodies buried for nine full days, the government halted almost all of its official searches for survivors by the weekend. But for most of the week displays of courage were common occurrences as Mexican and foreign crews crawled into dark crevices or dug among the rubble of structurally weakened buildings in the increasingly forlorn hope of finding living victims. Equipped with special ultrasound detectors, a large team of Frenchmen managed to rescue 35 survivors, winning instant national acclaim. At the Nuevo León condominiums operatic tenor Plácido Domingo busily operated a command post. The bodies of four of his relatives were finally recovered from the rubble. "Plácido Domingo has won the heart of all Mexicans," declared Mexico's leading philosopher, Octavio Paz. "His is a typical case of what has happened.

In every sector a leader has emerged."

And amid the carnage there were small miracles. Rescue crews managed to pull at least eight newborn infants from the ruins of two hospitals. The extra fluid in their tiny bodies apparently helped to keep them alive, and their chances of survival appeared astonishingly good. "They're durable, made in Mexico," exclaimed Lt. Col. Rolando Cuevas Uribe, chief of pediatrics at the still-standing Military Hospital.

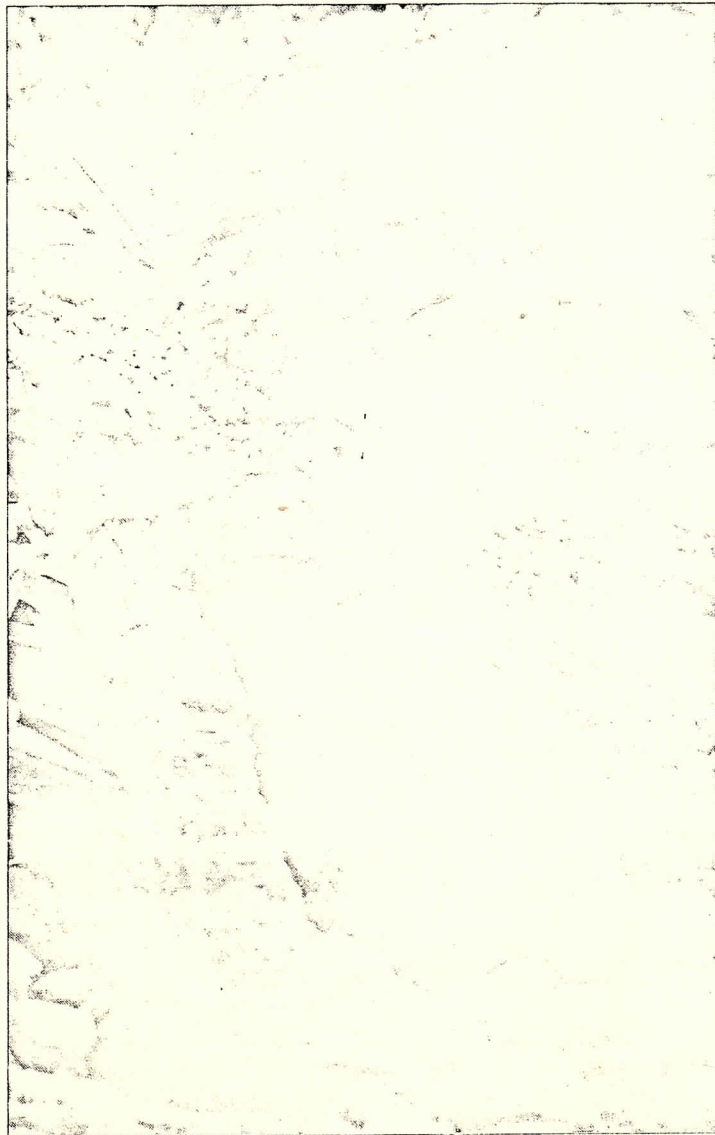
As the magnitude of the tragedy became apparent, Mexico was flooded with offers of foreign aid. Arriving at the scene of the disaster, Nancy Reagan personally presented a U.S. Treasury check for \$1 million as a small down payment toward a rebuilding effort expected to cost a minimum of \$2

billion. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank pledged to divert a total of \$1.1 billion in existing Mexican loan programs to reconstruction aid. Perhaps predictably, the generosity was tempered in some instances by the suspicion that money donated to the government's official Fondo de Reconstrucción might be raked off through corruption. "We would rather make a direct contribution than go through the bureaucracy," says Lorenzo Meyer, a historian and political scientist at the Colegio de México. "This is a demonstration of lack of confidence, and I hope the government absorbs it positively."

Immense: There is little doubt that the reconstruction effort will be immense. Some 400 buildings crumbled in the twin quakes; another 700 were severely damaged. The tremors destroyed two of the city's largest hospitals and numerous government and private office buildings and damaged or leveled more than 200 schools. According to official figures, 31,000 *capitalinos* were suddenly homeless; foreign diplomats and international relief officials placed the real figure as high as a quarter of a million. Many will not find new shelter soon. Government employees are likely to be eligible for federal loans, but banks have not given out money for private housing in months. And when they have, the terms have been generally prohibitive—a 50 percent down payment entitling a home buyer to a five-year mortgage at 60 percent interest.

Optimists noted that Mexico's industrial plant remained intact, its vital oilfields undamaged. Subways, railroads, highways and ports continued to operate normally, and aside from computers and switchboards, little needed to be imported. Reconstruction costs of about \$2 billion are not beyond the means of a nation whose economic output is an estimated \$188 billion a year.

The fact is, however, that Mexico has seldom lived within its means. Its foreign debt stands at \$97 billion—the second highest in the developing world—and even before the



Exhausted in the rubble: Dwindling hopes for locating more survivors

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