

Christians respond to disaster in El Salvador; LAM is working to provide assistance

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)—Christians from around Latin America, including many related to the Latin America Mission, are responding to a massive earthquake that hit El Salvador on January 13 leaving more than 400 dead.

The quake off of El Salvador's coast was felt from northern Panama to central Mexico -- a distance of more than 1,100 miles.

Frequent aftershocks in the Central American nation continued to frustrate rescue workers and sent Salvadorans scurrying from their homes and offices. More than 500 aftershocks shook the area in the wake of Saturday's 7.6 magnitude quake.

Red Cross official Mildred Sandoval said 403 deaths had been confirmed nationwide in El Salvador as of midday January 15. The El Salvadorian Red Cross estimates that at least 1,000 bodies are buried under landslides and debris.

Police also reported 2,000 injured, 4,692 houses destroyed and 16,148 damaged. Most of those still missing were in Las Colinas, located six miles east of San Salvador.

Six deaths were reported in neighboring Guatemala. Anticipating a rising death toll, Salvadoran President Francisco Flores asked for 3,000 coffins to be donated by other countries.

Most of the victims of the quake have so far been pulled from the San Salvador suburb of Santa Tecla, where a massive mudslide engulfed as many as 500 middle-class homes.

In Santa Tecla, hundreds of emergency workers and volunteers struggled to shovel dirt from around collapsed homes in a sea of mud, tree limbs and rubble. Dazed survivors milled around the mounds where their homes once stood.

Bob Sabeen, a missionary with the Latin America Mission, reports from Costa Rica that the president of Christian Camping International Latin America (a dentist and lay pastor), Mario Palencia lives in Santa Tecla. His neighborhood is not the one worst hit where over 1,000 are buried, but he lives close by. LAM plans on working with Sabeen and Palencia to provide relief assistance.

"We are now just about 48 hours following the quake, and it will be an absolute miracle if the death toll from this disaster doesn't go well over 1000," reports LAM missionary Craig Rice from Costa Rica.

"After Hurricane Mitch in 1998, ways were set up to send aid supplies from everywhere in the world. In Costa Rica, churches sent aid supplies to Nicaragua in trucks," Rice said. He added that he would be working to establish a similar process to respond to this disaster.

“We are following the situation closely,” says José Zirena, Finance Manager/Controller for LAM. “Whatever we can do from our side, consider it done,” he wrote to LAM missionaries in the region.

“I am setting up an "El Salvador Relief" fund, to receive donations for the benefit of those affected by the earthquake and its aftermath,” Zirena said.

Funds raised by LAM will be distributed through partner churches and Christian organizations in the affected region to help build new homes, rebuild churches, replace household goods, establish businesses, find jobs and provide other services.

LAM has worked closely with local churches in other disaster locations, including Venezuela where thousands were killed in floods and mudslides in late 1999. LAM provided transportation funds to move relief goods and offered other services through Christian organizations in that disaster.

In all situations, the Mission works through local churches or already-established Christian ministries to assure that assistance will be most effective and accountability is assured.

Funds to assist in El Salvador may be sent to the Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33161 marked for El Salvador relief.

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM’s Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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