

Quake Orphan Reflects Peru's Loss, and Anger



Gerson Williams Alviar, with his aunt Rosario Carhuayo, was orphaned in the earthquake.
Ana Cecilia Gonzales-Vigil for The New York Times

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PISCO, Peru, Aug. 23 — Through the choking smoke and with little light to guide him, Luis Palomino dug furiously through the rubble of the San Clemente church here two hours after last week's earthquake buried parishioners under a pile of adobe stones.

Then, somewhere in the distance, he heard a baby crying.

Disoriented, Mr. Palomino, 30, said he could not locate the noise, until about five hours later, around 1 a.m., when he and his cousin Abel finally pulled 7-month-old Gerson Williams Alviar from beneath the body of his father, William.

While Gerson survived, both of the baby's parents and all three of his sisters died in the church that night. So did as many as 60 members of one extended family, the Espinos, to whom the baby is related.

More than a week after the earthquake, the baby's grandparents and his rescuers insist that if the government had mobilized its rescue efforts sooner, Gerson would not be an orphan today. Nor, they say, would so many people — about 540 in all, more than 432 of them in Pisco — have died from lack of air or from injuries suffered in the 8.0-magnitude earthquake that shook southern Peru on Aug. 15.

As it was, families here say they were left to sift the ruins for the dead and the living, amid faint cries and the sounds of cellphone buttons being pressed. "People were alive in there, but no help came," said Kiara Alviar, 16, one of Gerson's aunts. "It didn't have to end this way."

Professional rescue teams and heavy equipment to move debris did not arrive in Pisco until the next morning, more than 12 hours after the town of 90,000 had been demolished. Many of the victims choked to death on the thick dust cloud from the crumbled adobe stones, officials said.

Peruvians around the country now refer to the disaster as the Pisco earthquake. But the sad fact is that in those first hours, few outside Pisco knew either where it had struck or that it had been so devastating.

The temblor took out Pisco's electricity and cut off all communications, including fixed-line phones and cellphones. Police radios, the few that there were, did not function, giving local officials little ability to contact rescuers in Lima, the capital city, about a four-hour drive away.

“The national police didn’t have the capacity to do anything,” said the Rev. Luis Miró, a priest at the San Clemente church. “It was a chaotic state. You couldn’t call Lima, there was no light. They didn’t have working radios. It was a huge failure.”

In the days since, many in Pisco have questioned the government’s emergency management system. That night, Alan García, Peru’s president, declared that few deaths were expected and that damage appeared limited.

“Thank God, the earthquakes have not resulted in a great catastrophe,” Mr. García said on television.

But as emergency response teams were mobilizing to reach Ica, the seat of one of Peru’s most important agricultural regions, and Chincha, the initial quake and its aftershocks had leveled more than 85 percent of Pisco, a seaside town of mostly modest adobe homes.

In recent days, Mr. García has said publicly that he regrets the collapse of the telephone system and that the country needs more communication reserves. Even on the night of the tragedy, he said, “Our country should be better connected for circumstances like this.”

That night more than 300 relatives and friends had filled the 200-year-old San Clemente church to pay tribute to Alejandro Nery Espino, the family patriarch, a well-respected man who had managed a fleet of city minibuses and had died a month before of a heart attack at age 67.

The Mass began at dusk. The Espino family filled the first two rows of pews, with friends and other relatives behind them. Just as the Rev. Emilio Torres was finishing the service, the earthquake struck. Witnesses, including two priests in the church, said the earth moved up and down like a jackhammer. Then it swayed from side to side.



Luis Palomino, right, and his father, Romulo, pulled people from the rubble of a church in Pisco, Peru, after the earthquake.

Credit

Ana Cecilia Gonzales-Vigil for The New York Times

“I thought I was dead for sure,” said the Rev. Alfonso Berrade, who was having a cup of tea in the priests’ residence across a courtyard.

As the roof began raining stones onto them, the churchgoers screamed. Some ran for the exits. About 15 bodies were later found buried at the church’s front door, said Maximo Acosta, the head prosecutor in Pisco.

Mr. Palomino and his father, Romulo, 49, were in Pisco visiting family that Wednesday night. Mr. Palomino’s grandparents were attending the service for Mr. Espino, a longtime friend. Father and son groped their way through the darkened streets with Abel. They

finally reached the church around 8 p.m. to search for Mr. Palomino's grandparents and little cousin.

Once inside, they concentrated on the church's center area, where they knew most of the mourners would have been sitting.

Then Mr. Palomino heard baby Gerson's cries, but only for a moment. First, he thought the cries were coming from outside the crumbled church. Moments later, he could not pick them out from the quiet moaning of other churchgoers, buried but alive.

The men continued pulling away stones and calling for family members. Early on, a captain with the National Police yelled at them to get out. "Leave them! Leave them! Get out of here!" the elder Mr. Palomino recalled the captain saying.

The Palominos ignored him and continued their work, dragging both the dead and the living through the church's front entrance. Romulo Palomino said they pulled out about 20 people, eight of whom were alive.

Local officials in Pisco confirmed that the Palominos had recovered several bodies. They were not alone; the Palominos said they saw other family members working feverishly through the dark, dusty haze, desperate to save their loved ones.

Three hours into the search, Luis Palomino again heard a baby faintly crying. Once he and his cousin had located the sound, they dug for two more hours before finally finding the baby under his father.

"The father saved the baby," Mr. Palomino said. "He shielded his body and supported all the weight of the falling stones on his back."

Romulo Palomino, meanwhile, had pulled his own relatives from the church. They were badly injured but alive, he said. But his mother

and niece died on the way to a nearby hospital, and his father died once there, he said.

At least 90 people died inside the church in all, about two-thirds of them members of the Espino family.

“The dust and the pressure of the adobes and the columns, it was just too much,” Romulo Palomino said. “It was the dust more than anything that was killing people.”

The morning after the earthquake, father and son took tiny Gerson to a clinic a few blocks away to be examined. The next day, on Friday, relatives of the boy tracked Luis Palomino down. The baby instantly recognized Diego, one of his uncles, the elder Mr. Palomino said.

Today baby Gerson, known as Willy by his surviving family, is living in Ica with his maternal grandparents. Gerson’s cuts have healed. He smiled and looked contented on Wednesday as his aunt Kiara held him and rocked him in a small blanket. But he will never know his mother, Flor de Maria Alviar, a homemaker to her four children, or his father, William Herrera Espino, who was a private security guard. The couple had hoped to open a small business of their own, perhaps a clothes shop, said Manuel Alviar, Gerson’s grandfather. When the baby is older, his relatives plan to tell him more about the day he lost his family in San Clemente.

“I plan to tell him the truth,” said his Marta Alviar, his grandmother. “I will tell him how the help didn’t come soon enough, and how his father saved him, how he gave his life to protect him, as any father should.”

