

The volcano awakens...

by Carlos Alberto Chica

Manizales, Colombia — Only four kilometres away from the Nevado del Ruiz volcano, the clip-clop of mule hooves echo through a dense mist. And Helvencio Martinez's voice sounds old and weak as he remembers that night of November 13 in 1985.

"Everything became so hard, solid. Rocks were raining down like the devil," he says, gesturing up through the shadow of the now-quiet volcano. When it blew last year, the heat melted the crater's ice-cap and touched off a mudslide that literally buried some 23,000 people in the town of Armero. It permanently changed the landscape spread out beneath the Nevado del Ruiz, on the eastern slope of the central Andean chain west of Bogota, the capital

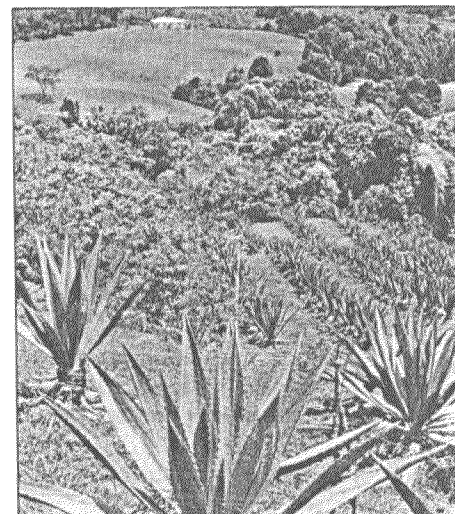
It is not hard to understand why Helvencio stays on his ranch even after the violent volcanic explosion. "I'll never move from here," he says, "unless I get a guarantee of another ranch, a parcel where I can bury my last remains." Unfortunately, nobody can give Helvencio that guarantee.

In just two hours, the mudslide destroyed some of the country's richest rice, sorghum, corn and soy farmland and completely covered a huge, modern cattle farm.

The volcano caused no less than 23,000 deaths and 5,200 serious injuries, destroyed 50 urban and rural schools, left 4,000 students classless, razed some 4,400 homes, and left 8,100 people unemployed and 60,000 without a drop of water to drink.

Long before such statistics had been gathered, however, emergency relief was being flown into the area from around the world. Twenty countries, as well as private and public organizations, national and international, worked day and night to search for survivors, dig out bodies, tend to the wounded and set up temporary camps in the horrible days after the tragedy.

Most of the survivors still live in relief camps — 18,000 according to the official count. Others have squeezed into the homes of friends or families in the cities, while they await help in building a new life.



The region of Armero had some of the best farmland in Colombia.
(CIDA Photo. P. Morrow)

The mudslide razed some 4,400 homes in the valley. (UN Photo: Milton Grant)

