



Rescuers worked day and night to search for survivors. (© 1985 Frank Fournier/Contact)

Life in the camps is less than ideal. There were some reports of violence and sexual abuse, and some beneficiaries are showing impatience and sinking hopes. To be perceived as victims "makes them feel helpless, lessens their self-image and creates resentments," says Rev. Yvan Marin, the Roman Catholic priest who directs pastoral work in the camps.

A lot of survivors are distressed by the loss of close relatives.

In the first months after the disaster, there were stories of reunited families. Many sat riveted to television sets, watching new accounts and scanning crowds in search of family and friends.

A year later, some are still looking... although such reunions are now a rare event. But the majority of the survivors — children without parents, parents without children — must simply accept their losses and do what they can to rebuild their lives.

With the advice and financial support of international organizations, the government announced its rebuilding plan. This includes risk-

## November 13, 1985...

The Nevado del Ruiz volcano, in the Colombian Andes, began to show signs of activity in November 1984, after being dormant for over a century. For almost a year these sporadic signs seemed to indicate no imminent danger, and people grew accustomed to them.

However, on Wednesday, November 13, 1985, at about 3:00 p.m. the earth began to shake in the area surrounding the volcano, and a farmer later reported that he saw a huge column of smoke come from the crater and climb very high in the sky.

At about 5:00 p.m. the people in the town of Armero, on the bank of the Lagunilla river about 45 km from the crater, saw fine particles of volcanic dust falling on the nearby houses.

At about 7:00 p.m. a violent storm struck the town, covering the rumbling sound coming from the volcano. It appears that local authorities hesitated to evacuate the thousands of townspeople that night. In the pouring rain, despite warnings from the Red Cross and national authorities.

At about 9:00 p.m. two loud explosions were heard, followed by an eruption of red-hot volcanic stones which melted the snow surrounding the 5,400 metre-high crater. Then a mixture of water, mud and ash rushed down from the mountain at a speed of up to 45 km per hour.

Following the bed of the Lagunilla river, within minutes this mudslide swept over the town of Armero, killing nearly 23,000 people — almost its entire population.

A relief camp for the survivors. (UN Photo: Milton Grant)





The valley of Armero, after the disaster. (1985, Frank Fournier/Contact)

prevention projects, social and economic reactivation, and reconstruction of the region's infrastructure. It is financed by international donations estimated at \$115 million.

And, some privately-initiated projects have also been undertaken to fill in the gaps left by government programs. Two ranchers have set up a small irrigation system and are now working with neighbors to rebuild the old Armero aqueduct, destroyed by the mudslide.

Small businesses are growing in the camps, and houses and schools are popping up. As a result, food and cash subsidies are being replaced by loans to private businesses. A recent government report on the refugee camps said 455 credits totalling \$560,000 have already been extended and 610 more, worth \$1 million, have been approved.

The official rebuilding program calls for creation of 188 commercial establishments, 125 small and

medium industries, and 124 service businesses in the region to bolster the private enterprise already taking root. And with help from local businesses, the relief groups — including the Catholic church, the UN Development Program, UNICEF and FAO, as well as government agencies — are training people to take over those new businesses, which are to replace farming as the area's primary economic activity.

Already, two tailor shops have been built in the cities of Guayabla and Lerida, and are being run by women displaced by the eruption. They received administrative and managerial training from a national educational service.

It is clear that, however slowly and fitfully, the rebuilding of the region is under way. Many would wish that things went faster. But such is the drama of natural disasters: in a few hours, the work of a lifetime is taken away, the heritage left by many generations is wiped out. And rebuilding takes time, and can

## Canadian aid to Colombian survivors

On November 15, 1985, CIDA announced a contribution of \$60,000 to the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO) to assist in the volcano relief effort. That same evening, a Canadian Armed Forces Hercules plane left for Colombia carrying \$100,000 worth of emergency supplies, such as blankets, drinking water and medical supplies for the Red Cross and Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO).

The Department of Energy, Mines and Resources sent experts and seismographic equipment to monitor the volcano and warn of any further danger.

CIDA announced another contribution of \$250,000 on November 18. Of this, \$60,000 went to UNICEF's emergency efforts; \$50,000 to World Vision for tents, blankets and water-purifiers; and \$30,000 to Development and Peace for food, shelter and clothing. Canada's embassy in Colombia was given \$100,000 to fund small, local rehabilitation projects, and PAHO received \$10,000 to supply anti-tetanus vaccines and syringes.

seldom bring back things as they were before.

**Carlos Alberto Chica is a Colombian journalist working for Inter Press Service (IPS).**