

the southern part of the city. Of the 14-storey building "Nuevo León," originally 180 metres long, only 60 metres remained intact as if by a miracle. The destruction of the rest of this building had been so complete that the rubble left behind was only about 4 storeys high.

Even disregarding the possibility of an afterquake, the tonnes of rubble hanging precariously in mid-air added to the dangers of rescue operations inside the ruins. Moreover there was an acute risk of explosion due to fractured gas piping or petrol vapours from the remains of parking garages.

The hundreds of Mexicans surrounding each ruined building showed considerable calmness and tenacity, always in the hope of finding their loved ones. Each time a rescue dog started barking or digging into the rubble, a second dog was brought along to confirm location of another buried victim. Then the calling and knocking method was used to make contact and find out if the victim was still alive. In many cases this method was successful, largely due to the astonishing discipline shown by the Mexicans who immediately stopped all machinery and allowed absolute silence to reign.

The Swiss Federal Office for Air Protection Troops (FOAPT) always set down their men at locations where rescue dogs had located buried victims who might still be alive, although for a large number of these victims rescue came too late. The rescue equipment brought from Switzerland was complemented by heavy machinery such as tractors, excavators, cranes and compressors arriving in Mexico City from all over the country.

Six days after the earthquake, the SDR ceased its search and rescue operations. Rescue workers and dogs had given their utmost, but although completely exhausted their morale was still high.

Personnel and Equipment

The SDR Team, with several women amongst its 36 members

was made up of commanders and specialists, disaster dog guides and FOAPT troops.

The rescuers took with them about 3.5 t. of their own equipment, such as sledge hammers, compressor, jacking cushions, etc., thus allowing work to be started immediately on an independent basis.

The disaster dogs, some of whom were on their first serious mission, were chosen from about 80 of these dogs kept in constant readiness in Switzerland. They did sterling service amongst the appalling ruins and rubble. The rescue team also took 16 tonnes of relief goods worth about Sfr. 600,000 with them, including one tonne of blood plasma, tents, sleeping bags, blankets and cooking utensils.

On every mission radio-communications equipment with a range of several thousand kilometers is taken along to ensure communications between the home base and mission commander. A number of portable intercom units, which are of course indispensable, are also carried.

On the day after arrival two more Swiss-trained girls from the USA joined the SDR team as disaster dog guides.

Since the infrastructure remained largely intact, with adequate medical personnel, no extra doctors were found to be necessary and the water treatment plant which had been placed in readiness was not required.

Although the Swiss were the first rescuers on the scene, they were



A disaster dog guide in action.

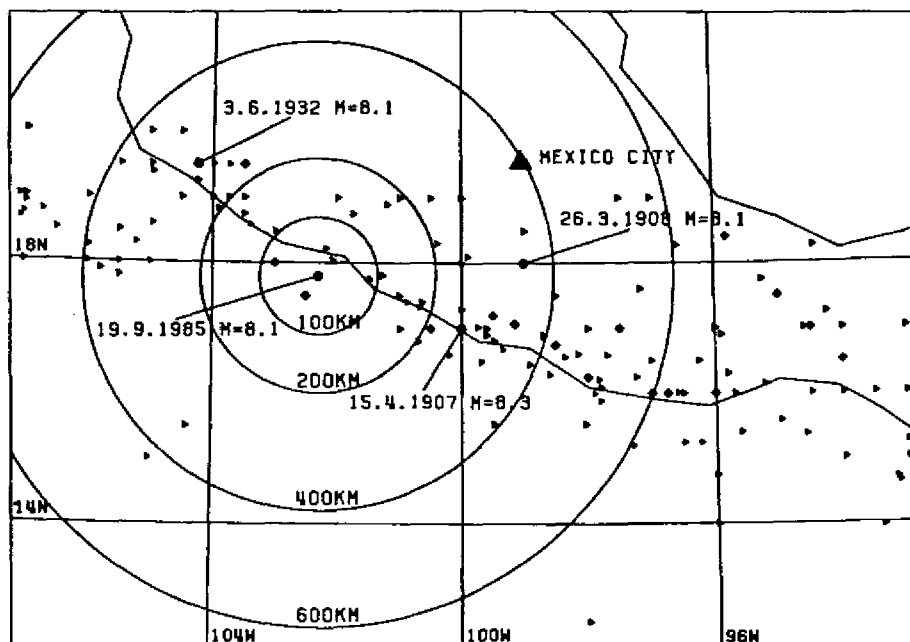
not the only ones by any means — over 700 helpers arrived from 15 countries. The disaster dogs, who had apparently been trained by widely differing methods demonstrated extremely varied behaviour. Acoustic and optical sensors were often used for locating victims, and in some cases even infra-red heat detecting equipment was used. Although no reliable data is available on the success of such methods, there can be no doubt that this type of equipment must always be regarded as complementary to the use of dogs, but never as a replacement.

Results and Achievements

Is it possible to measure the results and achievements of this mission — is there any way of evaluating them? Concrete achievements are the eleven lives saved and the 145 dead recovered during the rescue period. The timely arrival of the team and the benefits resulting from the material brought with them is also a basis for assessment.

However it should be remembered that what counts in Mexico is not only the eleven lives saved — recovery of the dead is also important. For hundreds of families this brings the certainty that mothers and sons are no longer lying in agony under the ruins, which can mean a great deal in such times despite sadness and mourning ...

Neither is it possible to measure the courage and hope which can be given to these people in moments of desolation and consternation.



Major earthquakes ($M \geq 6$) occurred in southern Mexico since 1900.

Reconstruction Work by the SDR

The tasks of the SDR include not only the unit's actual rescue work, but also the clarification of survival and reconstruction requirements and the identification of suitable projects.

On 25th September 1985, delegates of the Swiss Federal Office for Disaster Relief Abroad signed an agreement with the governor of Michoacán for the reconstruction of a destroyed hospital in Lázaro Cárdenas.

The "Hospital Civil Lázaro Cárdenas," with 59 beds and a staff of about 160, provided essential services such as medical care, surgery, pediatrics and obstetrics.

Although this town is situated directly on the Mexican coast, much nearer to the epicentre than Mexico City, it suffered considerably less damage than the capital.

The "Hospital Civil," however, was damaged heavily enough to put it out of action — although it can be rebuilt. The equipment and instruments saved have been deposited at the local Red Cross center, and the patients were transferred on a makeshift basis to the neighbouring hospital.

In the meantime reconstruction work has already started, under the supervision of two SDR staff members.

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The Swiss Disaster Relief Unit is an instrument of Switzerland's policy of international solidarity. It has been providing emergency assistance abroad since 1974, and its missions are financed by the Swiss Government.

The SDR provides humanitarian aid following natural and civil disasters, warfare and conflicts, and also assists refugees in times of famine.

Assistance can be provided in the rescue phase immediately after a disaster, in the survival phase or only in the reconstruction phase.

For immediate aid there exists an integrated rescue organization under the leadership of the SDR, known as the

"Swiss Rescue Chain." Apart from the SDR unit, this incorporates the Swiss Air Rescue (REGA), the Swiss Disaster Dog Association (SDDA), the Federal Office for Air Protection Troops (FOAPT) and the Swiss Red Cross (SRC). Specialists and rescue material provided by the Swiss Rescue Chain can go into action at extremely short notice at the scene of a disaster.

In the same way as the SDR itself, the Swiss Rescue Chain is a voluntary organization run along typically Swiss military lines.

The SDR is under the command of Eduard Blaser, delegate of the Swiss Federal Office for Disaster Relief Abroad.