

The Guatemalan Earthquakes— February 1976

In one of the Western Hemisphere's worst natural disasters, radio amateurs have once again demonstrated their readiness to provide desperately needed communications.

By Don Waters*

Within two hours after the first severe earthquake (7.5 Richter) struck the Central American republic of Guatemala at about 4 A.M. on Wednesday, February 4, 1976, amateur radio operators in the Miami, Florida, area were receiving and retransmitting emergency messages from stunned officials and others in Guatemala City. Even earlier, TG9CP interrupted a QSO between K7PPQ/5 and W8HXP with first news of the disaster. By midday, amateurs in dozens of other areas of the U.S. had swung into action.

Other quakes followed the first for several days, compounding both the relief effort and communications. Later, estimates were that at least 60% of the central communications facilities had been put out of action. Unlike the Nicaraguan earthquake where the disaster was confined to the city of Managua, the Guatemalan series of quakes wrecked havoc not only in Guatemala City but in dozens of large and small communities throughout the mountainous country. A number of towns were completely destroyed, with total death estimates reaching as high as 25,000 and 1,000,000 homeless in the cold winter weather. It was days before accurate reports began to filter in from out-lying areas of the country. One of the first requests to reach IARU headquarters was for 2-meter fm equipment in quantity to provide local communications facilities supplementing hf. U.S. amateur, Rafael Estevez, WA4ZZG, flew into Guatemala on Friday to survey needs on the spot. On the basis of his reports, a massive effort was launched at ARRL headquarters to assemble equipment and collect it in the Miami area for immediate shipment to Guatemala. U.S. manufacturers supplied equipment, including the R. L. Drake Company, who sent a complete hf station to the Guatemalan Red Cross. The Panamanian

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Radio Club provided a repeater.

First reports on Wednesday out of the stricken area came from TG9LW, TG9GF, KZ5ZK, and W4AD/TI2. Also active were TG9HS and her husband TG9MH.

With the number of amateur stations operating on hf in Guatemala severely limited — at one point only five stations were on the air — a massive log jam in message traffic soon developed. At the instigation first of South Florida EC, W4IYT, and former Southeastern division director, K4KQ, arrangements were made with Pan American Airways to receive bulk messages in Miami for transshipment to Guatemala for distribution there by officials. Six amateur stations were activated on a round-the-

clock basis in Miami to receive and handle traffic on 20 meters. Similar arrangements were instituted in New York, Dallas, Los Angeles and other areas.

In addition to WA4ZZG of the Sociedad Internacional de Radio Aficionados who flew to Guatemala, other Spanish-speaking members of the international Miami-based organization provided vital bi-lingual communications, among them: WB4RSE, WA4FIV, WN4TLE and HK3CJD.

Within hours after the first quake, Miami reported at least three emergency nets on 20 meters with W4s and W5s represented in large numbers.

Meanwhile, in New York City, the Hall of Science Radio Club station,

The President of the Republic of Guatemala, K. Eugenio Laugerud (right) greets special station TG9SIRA operators (left to right) WN4TLE, TG9KW and TG9CC president of the Radio Club of Guatemala. (WB4SNC photo)





Three-story building in downtown Guatemala City bears mute testimony to the giant force that struck the city. (UPI photo)



In San Pedro, a village northwest of Guatemala City, survivors pick their way through rubble the day after the quake struck. (UPI photo)



Guatemalan inquiry for handling via Pan American Airways is processed at Hall of Science Club station WB2JSM. (Jim Jaffe, WB2VOS, photo)



Message to Guatemala is aired at Hall of Science (New York City) Radio Club station WB2JSM. (Jim Jaffe, WB2VOS, photo)

WB2JSM, checked into the Florida nets offering assistance from the New York metropolitan area. Traffic quickly swelled and was aggravated by local TV news coverage. The station was soon deluged with calls from Guatemalans and other residents in the New York area with friends and relatives in the stricken country. Five amateurs manned telephones until midnight to take the calls and the station was placed on 24-hour, round-the-clock status. The message traffic volume built up to between 75 and 100 per day handled on the air with Guatemala which achieved

an impressive 75% response, plus between 600 and 800 messages daily which were distributed via Pan American to Guatemala where message delivery was handled by local Red Cross members. A key contact in Guatemala was a young California YL, Joanne Smith, K6GSW/TG9, operating portable through K4IWT at the Red Cross in Miami.

In Los Angeles the Palisades Amateur Radio Club set up a 2-meter net and a central telephone station manned by bi-lingual volunteers which received some 3500 names to process for infor-

mation. Those which could not be handled on the air were channeled to Guatemala via Pan American. This report does not begin to touch upon the hundreds of amateurs whose long hours of effort once again reflect so well on the tradition of emergency communication service exemplified in the Guatemalan disaster.

One development growing out of the Guatemalan experience is a decision by ARRL to maintain emergency communications gear in readiness for fast deployment to disaster sites in the future. S.I.R.A. has launched a loca-