THE TEXTURE OF DISASTER

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The world for some 70,000 Peruvians ended on Sunday afternoon, last May 31st, and to something over a million more, it must have seemed like it. About 3:30 that afternoon South America's worst disaster of this century struck Peru, an earthquake centered in the sea off the north-central coast. It lasted perhaps three minutes—a violent, rolling, undulating movement that brought roofs and steeple and walls and bridges smashing down. Narrow streets of mountain towns filled with crashing rubble. Inside or out, there was little escape. A placid city of 4,000 disappeared beneath a colossal avalanche shaken loose from its mountain backdrop. And as the dust settles, our statistics begin to numb the horror of it all: 50-70,000 dead, perhaps 800,000 homeless.

I arrived from Philadelphia the day after the quake, dispatched to Peru by the University Museum to explore opportunities for archaeology. Though Lima, being outside the damage perimeter of the quake, had gotten but a sound shaking, it was by then becoming clear that a 250-mile stretch of coastline to the north, from

The University Museum has a long record of archaeological research in the Andean zone of South America dating back to 1895 when Max Uhle worked at Pachacamac. Later excavations were under the direction of Professors Farabee, Mason, Kidder, and Coe, and during the Second World War Dr. Vaillant, then Director of the Museum, served as Cultural Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Lima. For more than a decade, however, the major energies of the Museum's American Section have focused elsewhere in the hemisphere. Currently under review are the possibilities for renewing investigations in archaeology and ethnology in the Peruvian Andes; the trip giving rise to this report provided reconnaissance data for these deliberations. Some of the details given here on the present status of the Callejon de Huaylas derive from the reports of Professor Paul L. Doughty written from Lima to the Peru Earthquake Relief Committee.

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Huacho to Trujillo, must have been badly hit. Communications with that zone had been severed. The mountainous hinterland for an unknown distance into the interior had apparently been affected, too. Especially, there was concern for the Callejon de Huaylas a picturesque highland valley which parallels the coast for about one hundred miles. Homeward to many of the people of Lima, the Callejon is notorious for the aluviones, avalanches that roar down feeder canyons to bury unsuspecting towns on the valley floor.

The icons were salvaged from the demolished church and housed in a temporary chapel. Townsmen noted that the images of their most important saints suffered the least damage.

The earthquake destroyed the church, bringing down the roof, upper walls, belfry, and rectory. Until it is rebuilt, townsmen will be concerned about Virú's regional image as an urban center.

As Peru's military government made overflights of the affected area in the next few days, the scope of the disaster began to emerge. Many coastal cities and towns including the major fishing and steel center of Chimbote (pop. 70,000) were virtually flattened, though loss of life was low. The Chimbote airport was still serviceable, and the government made this town its base of relief operations during the first several days.

The Callejon de Huaylas was a still greater challenge. The only landing strip, at Huaraz, had been destroyed. Radio communication was irregular. The dust hanging above the valley frustrated air photography and thus it was nearly a week before the status of the Callejon could be roughed in. As it was, Huaraz (pop. 20,000) had been so totally destroyed that the town's survivors will probably rebuild elsewhere. Northward down the valley, placed Yungay (pop. 4,000) had been flattened by the quake and then buried by an unbelievable avalanche. Only a handful of people survived, mostly children and their families who had been attending a circus on the edge of town. The avalanche crossed the valley to the west side and temporarily dammed the river. The subsequent flood as the river cut across the slide then caused still more damage to communities downstream. Damage eastward from the Callejon, a mountainous area laced with populated valleys, can even now be only roughly assessed. But from early reports destruction was considerable, especially in the areas closest to the Pacific coast.

Several cultural anthropologists, both U.S. and Peruvian, were in Lima during or shortly after the quake. All were concerned for the fate of the communities they had studied. My own thoughts were of Virú, a small coastal valley where I had carried out some 17 months of ethnographic research. I was more fortunate than my colleagues; Virú is located on the accessible northern peripheries of the quake zone and I could reach it by flying over the affected area to Trujillo and then backtracking to Virú. Others, whose communities lay in the Callejon, had to wait impatiently in Lima for news.

The status of Virú (town pop. 2,500) was appalling. I had been expecting relatively light damage since it was on the margins of the affected zone. Yet, though only four had been killed, the community was homeless. In this virtually rainless area the prime building material is adobe, solid but very brittle. In contrast to communities farther south most walls still stood, but were canted, cracked, and unsafe to live within. Most roofs had collapsed. The townpeople, fearing that new tremors would send the weakened adobes down on top of them (aftershocks were periodic for two weeks), moved into the streets. In the plazas and parks, the high school soccer stadium, and surrounding fields they constructed small huts of mats and poles.

After the first day, as stocktaking began, the townspeople reacted in at least two constructive ways. They entered the demolished church and salvaged the images of the saints, each the focal point of an elaborate annual religious fiesta. Protected by their niches most of the icons were only lightly damaged as the roof and upper walls came down. Townsmen took note of this as they dug them from the debris and arranged them in a hastily constructed mat
chapel on the plaza. The devout and bereaved commiserated with the saints over their common misfortune.

The second reaction was a vigorous effort to reorganize the town’s essential functions. A temporary market was laid out in the children’s playground. The primary streets were cleared by teams of householders, and the mayor formed an Emergency Committee which energetically collected house-by-house estimates of damage and began lobbying in the town’s interest before outside sources of aid. Their first successes came with the arrival of a medical assistance team and a company of soldiers with a dump truck. I was pleased to find that though I provided both money and labor, my efforts were insignificant compared with the outpouring of energies by the townspeople themselves.

Such experiences as the one I have reported here are by-products of the scientific research carried out by the Museum. An archaeological mission here led to street-clearing with old friends amid the ruins of a once-tranquil town. The Museum has touched the lives of people in many distant places. Its impact consists not only in scientific study, but also in the formation of human relationships which often outlast the project itself.

Ruins of the town’s only drugstore. Much of the stock was lost and serious shortages of household medicines ensued.

One of the first efforts of the Emergency Committee was to lobby in the town’s behalf to outside authorities controlling assistance. The arrival of a truck and crew of soldiers indicated their success.