

Strong quake shakes Honduras, kills five

By Noe Leiva – 1 day ago / May 27, 2009

TEGUCIGALPA (AFP) — A powerful 7.1-magnitude earthquake rocked the economic and tourist heart of Honduras Thursday, killing five, wounding at least 13, and shaking neighboring countries as far away as Mexico.

Officials expected the death toll to rise as reports arrived from rugged areas around Honduras' Caribbean coast, and locals feared further aftershocks.

"I felt my bed sway like a hammock," said 40-year-old Elias Dominguez, a resident of El Progreso, 260 kilometers north of the capital, who was woken up by the quake.

"The house moved as if it was on top of a wave."

Some 20 kilometers (15 miles) away, a 15-year-old boy died when a house collapsed on him.

The quake struck at 2:24 am (0824 GMT) off the northern coast of Honduras, near the tourist resort of the Islas de la Bahia in the Caribbean, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS).

The main tremor led to a 90-minute tsunami alert for Honduras and neighboring Guatemala and Belize, which was later withdrawn.

"We have a first report of five dead and 13 wounded," said Ana Rivera, spokeswoman of the Permanent Emergency Commission, at around midday.

Two children were among the dead, Commission chief Marco Burgos told local media.

The other deaths occurred on the Caribbean coast and in Gracias, in the west of the country, Burgos said. Only two of the country's 18 departments, in the south, were unaffected by the quake.

President Manuel Zelaya was later due to travel to the worst hit northern areas, Burgos said.

The quake had damaged two bridges, 50 homes, 10 schools, two public buildings, two hotels, a factory and a church, Rivera said.

A total of 17 aftershocks, all above magnitude four, had been recorded, she added.

At least seven people were being treated for broken bones in hospital in San Pedro Sula, Honduras' economic capital in the worst hit area near the northern coast, said Burgos.

San Pedro Sula is to host a general assembly of the Organization of American States on June 2 and 3.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton plans to be at the event as scheduled, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said in Washington.

Kelly also said that Washington was ready to help Honduras recover from the quake, though it had not yet received a request.

Southeast of San Pedro Sula, half of the 120-meter (130-yard) Democracy bridge in the town of El Progreso's collapsed, and part of its prison wall crumbled. Police transferred the prisoners elsewhere, an AFP photographer saw.

Red Cross representative Jesse Salazar said that communications were cut to the tourist island of Roatan off the northern coast of Honduras.

The quake's epicenter was 130 kilometers (80 miles) north of La Ceiba on the coast and 63 kilometers (39 miles) northeast of Roatan on the Islas de la Bahia in the Caribbean, the USGS said.

Roatan is the biggest of the Bahia islands, popular for fishing and diving, and a major draw for US and European tourists and retirees.

Kenton Pinet, a reception worker at Infinity Bay resort on Roatan, told AFP by phone that "we did have a strong one ... but I haven't seen injuries."

On the mainland, worried locals poured onto the palm-lined streets of the capital and other towns in the mostly poor, mountainous nation of 7.6 million people.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami watch immediately following the quake, but lifted it later when no reports of giant waves were made.

The last major earthquake to rattle the Central American nation was a 6.7 magnitude temblor in July 1999, the USGS said.

Honduras' northern neighbor Guatemala declared a red alert in the northeast of the country, and reported 26 homes damaged.

Shocks of a magnitude of around three were felt on some points of Mexico's southeastern Yucatan Peninsula, Luis Carlos Rodriguez, from the civil protection services, told local radio.