



When the PRI government appeared paralyzed after the 1985 earthquake, citizens formed their own rescue brigades to search for survivors in the rubble

By September 22, three days after the quake, thousands of Tlatelolco residents had realized that they would not be able to return to their

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homes and had become *damnificados*, damaged people, the earthquake refugees. They held an assembly in the Plaza de las Treturas. By informal consensus Abarca became their leader.

“In a way we had never done before, we had to make our own decisions,” Abarca said. “The earthquake hit, and then we found out the FONHAPO director couldn’t see us, the borough president was not in his office, the mayor wasn’t taking visitors. All of a sudden we were left in a city without a government.”

The assembly settled on a list of demands. They called on the government to rescue all the survivors and as many bodies as possible from fallen buildings; to prosecute officials they held responsible for the structural weakness of the Nuevo León; and to expropriate and rebuild as many damaged homes as possible, instead of attempting to relocate thousands of people elsewhere.

Within a week 472 bodies were recovered from the Nuevo León “only 472 dead,” as the Tlatelolco authorities stated, with a revealing lack of tact, in a wall mural they painted in the complex several weeks after the quake. Fewer than half of the bodies could be identified. Dozens of residents were never accounted for, but the authorities refused to include the disappeared in the death toll.

One week after the quake thousands of victims from Tlatelolco and other neighborhoods marched to Los Pinos. Police on horseback blocked most of them from reaching the entrance. But a small commission managed to skirt the security cordon and talk their way inside, where they presented their demands to several cabinet officials, making themselves heard at a level they would never have dreamed of reaching before the quake.

Within days a nascent citizens movement, spreading across the city, took up the Tlatelolco demands. The network of community groups that sprang up to defend the earthquake victims’ interests was the most vigorous grassroots activism Mexico had seen since 1968. Its logic was very different from the system’s. Under the PRI, unions and social organizations were organized from the top down. Their job, fundamentally, was to follow the bidding of the President and lobby for jobs, gifts, and other

perks from the PRI’s uniquely varied reserve of patronage. The pressure groups that formed in the weeks after the earthquake had no

to the government or the party, and they were born with a deep suspicion of the system's motives.

"The earthquake threw down walls, and it also threw down barriers between communities," Abarca said. "Instead of lines of communication from the top down, suddenly we had lines of communication that were horizontal, between different organizations and barrios, or, better yet, from the bottom up."

On October 24, the citywide movement inaugurated itself as the *Coordinadora Unica de Damnificados*, the Unified Coordinating Committee of Earthquake Refugees. To flex its muscles, the committee called a march to Los Pinos on October 26, and forty thousand people showed up. The PRI authorities, forced to negotiate, took precisely the position the residents had anticipated. They announced that their inspection had revealed that twenty-three buildings would have to be evacuated and leveled, and they promised to move the residents to "equivalent housing" in the State of México, as much as seventy miles away. The authorities planned to construct new office towers on the razed site, meaning many contracts for builders associated with the PRI.

When the people protested the plan, PRI officials went on the attack, as though they were embroiled in an elections campaign and not a human tragedy. Guillermo Carrillo Arena, who was head of the federal environmental agency was a key player in the earthquake recovery, denounced the earthquake movement, saying it was full of "bad Mexicans" and "seditious leaders moved by murky interests." Carrillo Arena, an architect, had been the top official to approve the plans for several of the recently constructed government hospital buildings that fell down, killing hundreds of people. At one press conference reporters asked him whether he felt responsible for their collapse.

"The only thing I can say about that question is that whoever is asking it is a prostitute and an imbecile," he replied. "Write that down, please."

As time wore on, the Tlatelolco residents' distrust of the government became so acute they adopted irrational tactics that put them in new danger. Desperate for some form of protest that would force the government to abandon its plans to relocate them, they moved, en masse, in the first week of January 1986, back into their unrepaired apartments, with the plaster dangling from the ceilings and the walls still scarred with fissures.

The kamikaze protest was risky, but it worked. Within days President de la Madrid fired Carrillo Arena. A new team of officials opened negotiations that included all the community groups on a plan for the "Democratic Reconstruction" of Tlatelolco and many other damaged neighborhoods. The plan put much more emphasis on restoring structures that could be fixed, so that the homeless would not have to suffer the additional trauma of starting life again in a distant location.

"People woke up," Abarca said. "They began to see the government not as something superior to them but as an equal with whom you could talk, negotiate, and even win a round or two. No one could remember ever seeing a government project defeated as categorically as we defeated the plan to move us out of Tlatelolco."

At year's end there were 180,000 homeless refugees living in tin lean-to shelters in streets and parks across Mexico City. The frenetic activity of the new movement had buoyed them throughout the fall, but depression took hold as Christmas approached. Leaders of the earthquake campaign, fearful of losing their momentum, summoned Mexican artists and actors to stage traditional Christmas plays, called *pastorelas*, in the shelters. According to custom, the plays end when Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem and stand outside the door of the inn, asking, in song, for shelter. Voices from inside respond with insults to drive them away. In December 1985 the plea for shelter had an immediate personal meaning for thousands of people who were still homeless. To cheer up, they used the Christmas carol to lampoon the authorities.

"In the name of the Lo-o-o-ord, we ask you for she-e-el-ter" went the chorus.

The response came back: "I am just the ma-a-a-yor. Why should I do you a fa-a-a-vor?"

Years later, when he thought about the earthquake Christmas, Cuauhtémoc Abarca would burst into that song.

Parallel to the victims' mobilization, a more militant movement came out of the National University, led by students like Imanol Ordorika.

Ordorika came from a family of politically active university professors. His parents had been brought to Mexico when young children, refugees from the Spanish civil war. Both his paternal grandfather and

his father had taught at the UNAM. When a boy, Ordorika had seen some of the street protests of 1968 and had never forgotten them. In 1985 he was twenty-six, an undergraduate in physics.

On the morning of September 19, as soon as the shaking stopped, Ordorika had headed, by instinct, for the giant UNAM campus at the southern end of the capital. With more than 200,000 students, the UNAM was a sociopolitical universe unto itself. For Ordorika and his crowd in the School of Sciences, it was primarily a laboratory for leftist politics, a testing ground for the ideas of an array of squabbling revolutionary sects. Some of these groups were so immersed in radical Marxist philosophy that they were on the brink of going over the line into *la lucha armada*, the clandestine armed underground. But Ordorika was in a faction that had sought to extend its ties to the masses outside the university by doing social work. So it came naturally to him to assemble with his friends at the UNAM campus on the morning of the quake and head out to the streets to see what they could do to help. They ran immediately into a confrontation with the government.

Their first clashes were with army troops. Within forty-eight hours after the quake, the army command ordered the ruins off-limits to volunteers, on the grounds that they were unstable and filled with bodies that could spread infection. But brigades of UNAM students were already working at public housing developments and hospitals, side by side with anguished survivors who wanted to be sure that they had done everything possible to rescue their living loved ones and recover the remains of their dead.

One day the army moved in to close off a street in a residential neighborhood where Ordorika's brigade was working in flattened homes. When the students refused to leave, the soldiers shoved them with their rifles; the students fought back with fists and stones. The soldiers blasted tear gas, but the students held their ground. The news traveled by word of mouth, and the city celebrated the students' resistance.

The students also challenged the bulldozers. The authorities, focusing on the dead as potential sources of disease, were eager to send in heavy equipment to compact the rubble and carry it away. At the Juárez hospital, a government facility where a twelve-story pavilion had crumbled, UNAM students lay down on the ruins to block the bulldozers

from going to work. As the students held off the machines, expert rescuers from France tunneled through the hospital wreckage. After nightfall on September 23, four and a half days after the first quake, one rescuer came upon a survivor trapped under two corpses in the chill darkness of the debris. Led back through the maze, the youth appeared, deathly pale, like a specter at the mouth of the tunnel, then mobilized his energy for one last lunge to freedom. It turned out he was a twenty-three-year-old medical student named Juan Hernández Cruz.

Despite this example, the authorities insisted on bulldozing the ruins. On September 24, the machines worked for a few hours, but the students managed to stop them again. During the break, rescuers finally tunneled through to the maternity ward. In a half-flattened room full of cribs they found a baby whose flesh was still warm. According to a tiny wrist bracelet, the still-unnamed son of Inés Cruz Soriano had been born on September 18. After nearly six days in the rubble, he was still alive. In all, eight babies were pulled alive from the maternity ward, forty-eight hours after government officials had ordered the pavilion leveled.

With these victories, the first weeks after the earthquake were a heady time for Ordorika and the UNAM brigades. "The city was ours," Ordorika recalled. "We were in control. We directed traffic in the streets. We commandeered public buses when we needed them. We organized the food lines in damaged neighborhoods. We fought with the powers that be."

University brigades helped repair telephone lines and the electric grid, published a crisis newspaper, and kept an alternative census of the death and damage toll. The radical students in Ordorika's School of Sciences brigade were among the volunteers who took the greatest risks by becoming "moles" who tunneled into the ruins. "We would crawl in between two slabs of concrete held apart by a board or a table leg with our feet tied to a rope that supposedly they could use to pull us out quickly—supposedly," Ordorika said, rolling his eyes at the thought of the danger he had plunged into. "After a few days there was a smell of decomposition in the rubble that still comes back to me sometimes."

Despite his wild curly hair and unkempt look, Ordorika was embraced by the people at the sites where he worked. While the food

shortages in the city were critical, Ordorika feasted on dishes that neighborhood señoras prepared for him and other volunteers.

"There was a general sensation that even in the face of an event as implacable and inevitable as an earthquake, we could act," he explained. "We had a sense of the possibility of action and a conviction that we had to act collectively."

Because of his rescue work, Ordorika gained a new understanding of the lengths to which the PRI system would go in order to neutralize its critics and draw them into its fold, one way or another. He and many students in the UNAM brigades stayed with the relief effort for more than a month after the quake. Through it all, they thrashed the President incessantly. But one day in November a messenger brought Ordorika a large envelope of embossed parchment. Inside was a letter from President de la Madrid informing Ordorika that he had been named a "Hero of Solidarity" for his rescue work and inviting him to receive a medal and a diploma at a ceremony in the Campo Marte, the military parade grounds along a leafy boulevard near Los Pinos. Ordorika's chief political enemy was offering to decorate him as a national hero in a bastion of the army with which he had been locked for weeks in running battle.

Some sixty students from the UNAM brigades, as well as hundreds of other citizens who joined the rescue effort, had been selected as national heroes. Ordorika and the other students decided they would go to the Campo Marte. At the moment they were called to receive their medals, they began shouting slogans at de la Madrid:

*¡Terremoto al presidente
Pa'que vea como se siente!*

Earthquake to the President
Let him know how it feels to live in a tent!

The chant spread through the crowd of heroes. The commanders of the Presidential General Staff, an elite corps in charge of the President's security, rushed to detain the instigators. After a scuffle the UNAM students managed to slip away without arrest.

Two weeks later, de la Madrid's office sent Ordorika his hero's medal in the mail.

In September 1985 Elena Poniatowska was still reporting for *Novedades* newspaper, mainly because nothing had happened to force her to change. The earthquake devastation immediately drew her into the streets. She started to pound out stories about the search for survivors and the new cooperation among everyday people, as well as their disappointment with the government's response to the disaster. About a week after the quake she had an experience of *déjà vu*. Her editor at *Novedades*, the same man who had suppressed her stories in 1968, instructed her to stop writing about the damage and the disarray. Word had come down from President de la Madrid, he said, that it was time for Mexico City to "return to normal." The editor told Poniatowska that her stories about the survivors' struggles were demoralizing the public.

"Out in the streets I could see that everyone was looking for bodies, and the heavy machinery was going into the ruins and coming out with legs and arms mixed in the rubble," Poniatowska recalled. "I went out at night and I saw that street gangs and punks and student radicals, people whom the society at large had rejected, were out there helping, forming bucket brigades to remove debris."

She had not pressed the issue in 1968, but now she was an older and more accomplished journalist. She decided to take her earthquake stories across Calle Balderas to the offices of an upstart newspaper called *La Jornada*. It had been founded exactly one year before the earthquake, on September 19, 1984, by a group of leftist intellectuals who split off from *Unomásuno*, the alternative paper that had started out bravely in November 1977 but then slipped back into the grip of the government. *La Jornada* (it means "workday" in Spanish) was modeled on sophisticated leftist daily tabloids in Spain and France. In comparison to *Novedades*, it was a crude operation, with no press of its own and edited on a dozen secondhand computers. Poniatowska just left off her latest earthquake story at the front door and went back to *Novedades*. An hour later she got a call asking her for another story the following day. She wrote reports for *La Jornada* every day for four months.

While other Mexico City papers were combing the city for signs of normalcy, *La Jornada* was devoting full pages every day to stories about social trauma, official ineptitude, and the burgeoning popular movement. When the Tlatelolco residents moved back into their teetering buildings, *La Jornada* held its presses to get the late-breaking story on the front page. For Cuauhtémoc Abarca it was surprising and satisfying to see something of his reality reflected for the first time in the press. "The people of Mexico City never existed for the press except in the murder and mayhem pages," he said. "Suddenly here was a newspaper treating us like citizens whose views were worth recording."

Here and there Poniatowska ran into friends from 1968. Raúl Álvarez Garín, the former student leader, set up an information center where people could file complaints and petitions for assistance. Heberto Castillo summoned his engineering expertise to explain how the seismic shock waves of the September 19 earthquake had made it especially damaging to buildings of a certain height standing on the soft subsoil of downtown Mexico City.

Of all the stories Poniatowska wrote, the one she found most compelling was on the plight of the sewing-machine operators who worked in a warren of sweatshops on Calzada San Antonio Abad. The women's long workday started at 7 a.m., so some eight thousand of them were already sewing when the quake struck. Whole blocks of warehouses filled with whirring machines had broken apart like dollhouses. The shop owners, instead of trying to find out how many of their workers were killed or ensure that survivors were rescued, hired heavy equipment to extract their machines and inventory. Many sweatshops had no licenses to operate, so, to avoid indemnifying victims' families, the owners argued that women who were killed were never on their payroll.

The army searched the rubble for two days, then gave up. On September 23, one woman clawed her way out of the ruins, saying that she had heard other voices under the wreckage.

The earthquake accomplished for the seamstresses what demeaning work conditions could not: it convinced them to organize a union. They saw Poniatowska so often as she came to report on their travails that they decided to name her their treasurer.

"I'm awful with accounts," Poniatowska said. "But they made me

treasurer for a sad reason. They were sure that I at least was not going to steal their money."

Homero Aridjis, a poet and novelist, never expected to lead an antigovernment organization. As an intellectual, he didn't admire the PRI system, yet he had served it in the 1970s, as Mexican ambassador to Switzerland and then to the Netherlands. Then, in late February 1985, another cloud of air pollution had settled over Mexico City. Because the government did not measure atmospheric pollution at that time, Aridjis couldn't be sure in scientific terms how bad the air was. But he knew he couldn't draw a deep breath. He and his city were suffocating.

He made some telephone calls to friends and soon had a petition to the government for relief from the smog signed by one hundred people, including the cultural cream of Mexico City: painters of the stature of Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Toledo, Alberto Gironella, and José Luis Cuevas; and writers like Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez, a Colombian who had made a second home in the Mexican capital.

"We who live beneath this viscous mushroom that covers us day and night have a right to life," the petition said. "What astounds us most is the lack of action on the part of the authorities."

The petition was published as a paid advertisement in several Mexico City newspapers on March 1, 1985. Aridjis received a torrent of calls and letters of support. Over the following months the Group of 100, as it came to be called, published other petitions, decrying air pollution, deforestation, and dolphin killing. The new environmental group had its headquarters in the study of Aridjis's home in the Lomas de Chapultepec neighborhood of Mexico City. Aridjis became its director and his American wife, Betty Ferber, the chief operating officer.

The government responded by doing nothing. Officials either dismissed Aridjis's group as silly or accused it of being a front for foreign interests.

"When it was founded, the Group of 100 was an anomaly in Mexico," Aridjis said. "It was a group where people participated voluntarily. The government couldn't figure that out. They couldn't understand the idea of volunteer work or disinterested civic action. It was never enough

for us just to have a cause. They always thought there was some hidden agenda. They thought that we must be paid by the CIA or that we wanted money for ourselves.”

Aridjis remembered a meeting with Pedro Ojeda Paullada, the Secretary of Fisheries under President de la Madrid.

“What do you want?” Ojeda Paullada had asked, wasting no time.

“I want you to make the fishing fleet stop killing dolphins,” Aridjis replied.

Ojeda Paullada laughed. “Okay, let’s talk seriously,” he said. “What do you *really* want?”

“I *really* want you to stop killing dolphins,” Aridjis persisted.

Ojeda Paullada seemed to Aridjis to get impatient. “Come on, now,” he said. “Just tell me what you want me to do *for you*.” The Fisheries Secretary couldn’t believe that Aridjis was taking up his time to plead for a bunch of sea creatures.

When the earthquake struck, Aridjis and his wife began to note the pattern of the buildings that had fallen down. About half of the nearly four hundred buildings destroyed had been built by the government: office towers, housing developments, hospitals, and schools. Aridjis summoned some independent architects, and soon the Group of 100 published another paid newspaper statement.

“Corruption is a bad builder!” they wrote. Mexico’s building codes were adequate, they contended, but lax enforcement and outright corruption had allowed government contractors to circumvent the codes in countless ways. Their charge echoed widely with the public.

After that the government never again failed to take the Group of 100 seriously. Nongovernmental interest groups like the Group of 100 became common. Aridjis’s idea, that defending the environment was a way to defend the quality of human life, no longer seemed so elitist to average Mexicans. After 1985 Aridjis was harassed, ridiculed, consigned to literary exile, and accused of being an agent of foreign imperialism, but he was never ignored.

The Aztecs called their universe the fifth sun. Before their time, the Aztecs believed, the world had been created and destroyed four times by

different forces of nature. The myth predicted that the fifth sun would be destroyed by an earthquake. On September 19, it seemed at first that the Aztec prophecy was being fulfilled. Probably twenty thousand people perished in all, although the figures (like the death toll from the 1968 massacre) were suppressed by the government and have never been fully revealed. There are still sad vacant buildings and empty lots along the Paseo de la Reforma, scars on the city’s heart. The Mexicans who lived the worst of the earthquake lost their sense of security and would never recover it.

Yet the earthquake was also invigorating. In its wake, because of the government’s failure to respond, there emerged a new form of popular political action, called *autogestión*, do-it-yourself politics. The notion that a community could band together to lobby the government in defense of its interests was not original, but it was new in PRI-controlled Mexico. The earthquake forced the capital city to shake off its dependence on the PRI system.

If the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre had revealed the repressive core of the system, the earthquake exposed its depths. On September 20, rescuers came upon the bodies of six men (two Mexicans and four Colombians) in the rubble-filled basement of the Procuraduría General de la República, Mexico’s equivalent of the Justice Department, headed by the federal Attorney General. The men had been arrested by federal police four days before the quake. Medical examiners announced, indiscreetly, that all of them showed signs of torture. Two had died of it.

On September 22, after another body with torture wounds turned up in the trunk of a car parked in the basement, the Attorney General, Victoria Adato, made a telling remark: “It’s absurd to suggest we tortured them,” she said. “They had already confessed.”

The new force that emerged from the earthquake was civil society. The citizens groups that formed were independent of the PRI, but they had no direct ties to opposition parties either. They mobilized Mexicans across class lines. The poorest of the poor, who had lived in decaying tenements in the old city center, joined with groups from solidly middle-class neighborhoods. And after the quake shattered their homes and lives, many Mexicans were willing to try tactics they had never considered before. Workaday citizens regularly clogged the streets with insolent

sit-ins and marches. When President de la Madrid inaugurated the World Cup soccer games in Mexico City in 1986, the crowd jeered and whistled at him.

The symbol of this irreverent new politics was Superbarrio, a masked figure in a spangled red costume and cape, a hybrid between Superman and a show wrestler. The figure, whose name might be translated as "Superhood," showed up at opposition demonstrations as well as government events, entertaining the people and taunting government officials with sassy clowning and doggerel. Superbarrio was modern Mexico's first homegrown masked man.

The earthquake also generated a new class of PRI politicians. Mexico City mayor Ramón Aguirre Velázquez, a PRI functionary since 1956, was confounded by the cheeky new opposition. He was slow to respond to citizens' demands and seemed to think his main task was to reestablish the government's tattered authority and channel relief resources through the PRI.

In contrast, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the young Secretary of Planning and Budget, quickly grasped the opportunity the new forces offered. Groomed since boyhood by his father, a former cabinet secretary, to be President, Salinas had completed a doctorate in political economy at Harvard in 1978 and shot up to the cabinet in just a few years in government. Under de la Madrid, he showed that he was an implacable budget cutter and calculating bureaucratic infighter. But unlike many PRI veterans who felt that power was theirs by entitlement, Salinas saw the need to build his own political base. During the earthquake he proved to be a dynamic administrator who was more willing than most officials to listen to citizens groups, which he saw as part of his future constituency.

One of Salinas's most effective aides was another ambitious young politician, Manuel Camacho Solís. He was detailed one day to accompany President de la Madrid at the inauguration of some of the first houses the government had built for earthquake victims. While de la Madrid was cutting the ribbon, some community leaders approached Camacho to complain that the new houses had been built not by the government but by the Red Cross, with international relief donations. City officials had taken down the Red Cross emblem just before the President arrived. Days later Camacho was sent to attend a meeting be-

tween city and federal officials and earthquake movement leaders, in a stifling room with no chairs. "The point of this meeting," one official whispered to Camacho at the start, "is to break them."

After Carrillo Arena was fired from the federal environmental agency, Salinas saw to it that Camacho was named to take over, even though he knew nothing about the environment. Camacho immediately opened his doors to earthquake groups and listened intently to their petitions, then crafted a "Democratic Reconstruction" plan that included many of their demands. He reached across political lines to name Heberto Castillo to head a commission of architects and engineers in charge of assessing the damage to buildings in Tlatelolco. He built almost fifty thousand dwellings for the homeless in one year. Together, Salinas and Camacho stopped the earthquake from permanently undermining de la Madrid's presidency.

The earthquake also spawned a new generation of community leaders. Some, like Cuauhtémoc Abarca, stayed in their neighborhoods. Abarca never left Tlatelolco. He continued to work with tenants groups, made an unsuccessful run for local elected office, and eventually founded an organization for street children. Others who emerged as leaders of groups like the Popular Union of New Tenochtitlán and the Barrio Assemblies (René Bejarano, Dolores Padierna, Javier Hidalgo, and Marco Rascón, to name a few) went on to careers as elected opposition officials.

The movement of nongovernmental organizations also received a tremendous boost. Since the 1970s, women's groups and human rights organizations, for example, had been working away on their issues, to little effect. After 1985 they acquired new collective momentum. As for Imanol Ordorika and his friends, they never looked back to the shrill, abstract radicalism they had practiced at the UNAM. After the quake they still espoused a leftist agenda, but they were committed to achieving it through the movement for democracy.