

Eye Witness To Tragedy



BRIAN SAMWAY

"The people in the barriada were wailing and crying. During the night there were more small tremors; and three or four huts collapsed. The people were afraid to go back inside so they slept out on the street," Brian Samway said. He returned last week from Peru. He described the May 31 earthquake which killed more than 50,000 and left half a million people homeless.

Samway is the son of Mrs. Mary Samway of Leonard Road, Rochester. A graduate student at Roosevelt College in Chicago, Samway was on vacation, visiting his Maryknoll missionary brother, Father Thomas Samway, in Lima, when the earth shook.

May 31 was to be a quiet day. Lima was hosting the World Soccer Championships. Brian Samway and his brother watched Peru trounce Bulgaria on television. About 3 in the afternoon, they set out on the superhighway skirting Lima to visit the ruins of Panchi-Tumac, the ancient Incan origins of modern-day Lima.

The temblor, the first shock of earthquake struck. "It lasted 40 seconds. We thought we had a flat tire," Samway said. "It was only when we reached the next toll booth on the highway and saw the walls trembling that we realized there had been an earthquake." They drove into Panchi-Tumac just in time to see a 30-foot wall of the reconstructed ruins collapse.

"Immediately we returned to

Lima to discover that the center of the earthquake was in the ocean near Chimbote in Northern Peru. Lima suffered little serious damage — walls were cracked but only a dozen or so adobe buildings actually collapsed. Five people died in Lima. There were many smaller tremors that evening.

"Never before in my life have I seen such expressions of fear on people's faces. Throughout the evening people were crying and roaming the streets, hesitant of returning to their dwellings. Many people in our barriada preferred to sleep outside on the ground or in cars rather than risk getting trapped under fallen debris, should another serious temblor strike.

"Many rumors were circulating; confirmed news was difficult to obtain. Most of the nation's communications system was disrupted and only ham radio operators remained in contact with the areas of devastation. Gradually, confirmed reports of the disaster arrived in the capitol. Peruvian airforce aerial photographs of the region revealed that Chimbote, Yungay, Caras, Huaylas, and Huaraz were destroyed."

Samway noted, "It was relatively easy to get aid and rescue personnel to the coastal region but extremely difficult supplying cities and pueblos in the mountain region. Yungay, Huaylas, Huaraz, Caras and Riccuay are in a 100 mile long valley between two mountain chains—Cordilla Negra and Cordilla

Blanca. These are very steep mountains reaching heights of 20,000 feet. Only airplanes could get into the area but none could land. Five roads enter the area and all were blocked by landslides."

"The initial shock of the earthquake destroyed nearly all the buildings in these towns. Many people were buried under the rubble and those that were injured or in shock just walked around in disbelief.

"About a half hour later the avalanches began. Apparently the mountains were severely shaken. The lakes near the top of the mountains into the valley burst and water, snow, ice and earth cascaded down the sides below. Traveling at 60 mph, tremendous avalanches swept down and covered quickly those residents who did not escape to higher ground. As many as 20,000 or 30,000 dead and injured were cover under layers of mud in these cities.

"In the city of Yungay, 3000 residents survived only because they escaped and climbed onto a cemetery hill over looking the city minutes before the slides.

"Rescue and recovery efforts were hampered by the many recurring tremors, high mountains, destroyed airstrips and blocked roads.

Because of the large numbers of dead buried under debris, it was impossible to extricate all the dead and near the end of the week hungry dogs and animals fed upon deteriorating bodies," Samway said.

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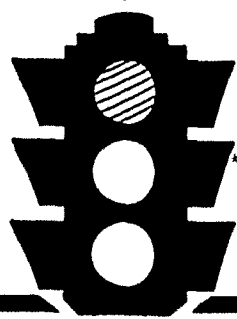
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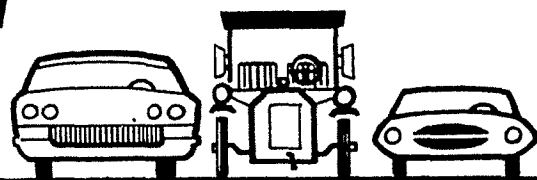
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