

Rebuilding El Salvador

A desperate country picks up the pieces after two deadly quakes

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With tears in her eyes, Sara Morales talks about the day the first earthquake hit.

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador — Ask Sara Morales about the earthquake that shattered her family's lives on Jan. 13 and, before you even finish asking the question, her tears start to flow. Once they subside, Sara sighs heavily. "It has been difficult," she admits softly. The 30-year-old mother of two starts to detail the day that life turned upside down for her, her two girls, her three godchildren and their mother — the day the first of two deadly earthquakes rocked this tiny, impoverished Central American nation of 6.2 million.

When the ground started shaking, Sara and her older daughter, 12-year-old Maria, were washing clothes for a neighbor. "Right away, I thought of my younger daughter, who was at home," Sara said. "I screamed to Maria, 'Please, go get the baby for me!'"

Her brown eyes again start to fill with tears. "I was praying, 'Please, God, don't let anything happen to my children!'"

Her prayer was answered: Maria found the "baby," 6-year-old Noemy, alive and unharmed. "She didn't have a scratch," Sara said, beaming, tears still shining in her eyes. Patting Noemy's cheek, she added, "Jesus has taken care of my girls at all times."

But the magnitude of the earthquake — which registered 7.6 on the Richter scale — and the countless aftershocks that followed did not spare the family's little home. The two-room structure, made of adobe, an inexpensive earthen building material widely used in El Salvador, was destroyed. Instantly, Sara and her girls — as well as her friend Carmen and her children, who live with them — were homeless.

For 15 days, the families' only shelter was a plastic tent, where, night after vulnerable night, the families lied awake in fear. Despite the mothers taking turns guarding their few remaining belongings, thieves stole most of their clothes as well as Sara's most valuable possession: her iron, which enabled her to earn her \$15-a-week washerwoman's income.

The families lived in the tent while Sara and Carmen begged relatives,

friends and neighbors — many of whom had lost their own homes — for items they could use to build a safer place to live.

Bit by bit, they collected nails, metal sheets, two-by-fours, wire, cardboard and bamboo. Then, guided only by Sara's prayers to God for

instruction, the two women took the hodge-podge of materials and built the temporary shelter where they and their children now live.

"Everything was planned since we drove the first nail," she declared smiling proudly. "God gave me the blueprints."

The families' current shelter, about the size of a one-car garage, has cardboard ceilings under a plastic roof. The walls, attached to a bamboo and wood frame, are pieced together from cardboard and lamina (metal sheets). The floor is dirt. The front door opens to reveal the tangle of adobe and cement that used to be their home.

Sara looks up at the ceiling of the little home, her eyes hopeful. "I think this could last us a year," she says. She frowns. "If there is no other earthquake."

But there's no guarantee of that these days in El Salvador. The Jan. 13 quake, and an even more destructive earthquake that followed on Feb. 13,

killed 1,150, injured more than 8,000, and caused \$1.6 billion worth of damage — one and a half times the government's annual budget.

More than 7,000 aftershocks have added insult to injury, terrifying Salvadorans so much that many children, like Sara's daughters, fear returning to school, and coffee-working peasants won't work in the mountains, where landslides threaten with each new temblor.

But the worst may be yet to come. Geologists have predicted the approaching rainy season may destroy as many as 500,000 additional homes standing on quake-weakened earth. Scores of temporary homes are threatened as well, making Sara's prediction that her family's makeshift house will last a year seem optimistic at best.

Sara, Carmen and their families are like more than 1 million people in El Salvador today — living in the best quarters they can manage since their homes were destroyed.

From Upward Mobility To Utter Hopelessness



Luis Nuñez walks through the rubble that once was his home.

For thousands, like Luis and Berta Nuñez and their six children, "home" since the quakes has been a refugio, or refugee camp.

It is a particularly cruel turn of events for this former middle-class family, who before the devastating earthquakes owned a four-room brick home in San Salvador's Tomayate neighborhood.

The Nuñezes, as well as 11 other families from their neighborhood, now live crowded in tents by the side of the heavily traveled Pan-American highway.

At the refugio, Luis explains, life is hard. Exhaust fumes fill the refugees' every breath, and many, especially children and the elderly, have been ill as a result. Between the roar of passing traffic and the need to guard the refugio from thieves, most adult refugees don't get more than four hours of sleep a night.

In the main tent, 26 adults and 14 children, ages 1 to 13, must share 15 mattresses. There is no room to relax, no privacy to relish, Luis says, adding, "It gets desperate at times."

For a few weeks, the refugees had portable sanitary facilities, but no more — renting them got to be too expensive. Water, stored in barrels, comes from a neighbor. Donated food supplies are running out.

So is money, says Luis, who sold home appliances before the earthquakes. "These days, no one is buying anything from me," he explains. "No one can afford



A middle-class family before the earthquakes; the Nuñezes now live with their six children in a refugee camp.