



NEWS

- NEWS
- SPORTS
- BUSINESS
- OBITS
- OPINION
- LIFESTYLE
- NIGHT & DAY
- VISIT SD
- TRAVEL
- RADIO
- 4SD

WEATHER 58° F | TRAFFIC | WEBCAMS | **HOT TOPICS:** CHELSEA/AMBER | EARTH DAY | NFL DRA



Border Affairs

LOCAL NEWS | NEWS BY REGION | NEWS BY TOPIC

EMAIL | PRINT | SAVE



Much fear, little hope in quake-hit village

Displaced families wonder what's next

BY SANDRA DIBBLE, UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER
 MONDAY, APRIL 19, 2010 AT 12:04 A.M.

EJIDO JOHNSON, Mexico — The birds are still chirping in their cages, and the bougainvillea blossoms are spilling from the shaded yards. But since the magnitude-7.2 earthquake that struck northern Mexico on Easter Sunday, the residents of the tiny rural community of Ejido Luis Encinas Johnson have been gone.

A mile away from their hastily abandoned houses, the community's 65 families are sleeping beneath tarps and tents pitched in the Sonoran Desert, yearning for home but too afraid to return.

"The fear is that another quake will come and bury us," said Juan Butrón, 58, a



PEGGY PEATTIE / UNION-TRIBUNE

nature guide and leader of the landholding group created by presidential mandate more than three decades ago.

Two weeks after the quake, questions about the future hang over farming towns and villages in the Colorado River Delta near the quake's epicenter, about 30 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Most of the damage to agriculture and residences is in Baja California, but the quake also affected communities in neighboring Sonora, and none more so than Ejido Johnson, a collection of small houses located nearly five miles from the closest paved road.

Although many communities suffered extensive damage, few faced such upheaval. Nearly all of the 79 houses are considered uninhabitable, said Guadalupe Herrera, the municipality's chief representative in the area. With the main irrigation canal now filled with dirt and crevices the fields of winter wheat are withering.

In Baja California and Sonora, the government has pledged to relocate the homeless residents with promises of plots of land and building materials. Baja California Gov. José Guadalupe Osuna Millán initially estimated that as many as 5,200 families faced relocation. But state authorities now say most will be able to move back home, even if they have to rebuild or repair their houses.

Sergio Montes, Baja California's deputy secretary of infrastructure and urban development, said last week that "perhaps less than a tenth" of the Mexicali Valley's residents will have to be relocated, but the final tally won't be known until the state completes its survey next month. In the Sonoran municipality of San Luis Río Colorado, which includes Ejido Johnson, state authorities said 150 houses were destroyed in the earthquake.

At Ejido Johnson, the sandy streets now have a ghostly feel. Most of the houses are still standing. But gone are the billowing lines of laundry, the sound of neighbors chatting in the shade of

As night falls in the desert around the Cienega de Santa Clara in Sonora, a member of the Rodriguez family snacks on chips in the family's encampment.



PHOTO BY PEGGY PEATTIE - UNION-TRIBUNE

Juan Butrón shows how high the floodwaters were in the main irrigation canal when the Easter quake struck.



Ejido Johnson

PHOTO GALLERY

In the desert around the Cienega de Santa Clara in Sonora, 65 families from Ejido Luis Encinas Johnson were chased from their homes by geysers of water emerging from cracks in the earth caused by the 7.2 earthquake Easter Sunday. The waters flooded their homes, streets and fields. The approximately 195 people have been living on a nearby mesa in a tent city. Officials tell them it is not safe to return; they will have to rebuild elsewhere. Most residents are also farmers whose crops have been compromised by either a layer of mud or a desperate thirst for water that has disappeared from their irrigation canals.

mesquite and cottonwood trees, the smell of wood fires with bubbling pots of beans.

Gone is Jesús Lara, 76 and blind, who could sit and listen to birds from his front stoop.

"It was paradise," said his daughter, Silvia Lara, 44.

The temblor "changed my life in one instant," said their neighbor from across the street, Sara Torres, 65, a widow who was one of the original settlers. One afternoon last week, the fragrance of roses hung over her garden as she sifted through the ruins of the small adobe house.

Torres was outside on Easter Sunday, tending to her goats, when she felt a sudden boom. Returning to the house, she found that a wall had crumbled. Across the street, her neighbor's adobe wall had also fallen.

Like other residents of the region, the villagers remember how foundations sank, deep crevices formed in their yards and streets, and jets of water and sand shot up, creating pools and leaving craters everywhere.

Leaving "makes me sad," said Butrón, the nature guide. "But what are we going to do if nature commands us? We could always fix our houses, but the problem is the ground."

Luis Mendoza, a seismologist based at a scientific research institute in Ensenada, said Ejido Johnson, like many parts of the Mexicali Valley, suffered from a process known as liquefaction, in which sandy soil saturated with water liquefies during an earthquake, pushing through the earth's surface.

"These soils become like a soup, and as a result the soil loses strength — some of these houses sunk into the ground," said Jorge Meneses, a San Diego-based geotechnical engineer and president of the local chapter of the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, a nonprofit technical society. "In San Diego, if we have an earthquake of that magnitude, we're going to have the same problem."

Although the community's land covers more than 13,000 acres, the group has water rights for less than 600 acres, enough to sustain only a fraction of the population, and many families subsist as temporary agricultural workers in other people's fields. Despite its isolation and harsh conditions, residents of Ejido Johnson say they feel profoundly attached to their community.

"It's not a place with a lot of money, but you can live here without a whole lot, and with a great deal of tranquillity," said Francisco Lara Zavala, 50, a farmer, who has lived in Ejido Johnson since he was 15.

Butrón, the head of the community, has been working to develop eco-tourism. Although Ejido Johnson is one of the delta's poorest farming communities, it is rich in wildlife, with much of its territory covered by one of the few remaining wetlands in the Colorado River Delta, the Cienega de Santa Clara.

Just a mile from their houses, residents gathered last week on more stable ground in the tent city that will be their home for the foreseeable future. The population has swelled to several hundred, as others from a Baja California community a few miles away have joined them.

Related stories

- ✦ [A call to revitalize once-lush estuary](#) (June 26, 2006)
- ✦ [Eco-tourists to the Colorado River Delta contribute much-needed revenue to struggling small communities](#) (April 27, 2008)

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The International Community Foundation is working with Mexico's largest environmental group, Pronatura, to raise funds for the displaced residents of Ejido Johnson. Send tax-deductible contributions to the International Community Foundation's Baja California Disaster Relief Fund at 2505 N Ave., National City, CA 91950. Donations may be made at uniontrib.com/baja-relief. More information is available at (619) 336-2250.

On Wednesday, one group of volunteers spent the morning playing games with the children, while others drove up with loads of donated clothes. One family hauled a cart from the town of Golfo de Santa Clara, drawing long lines for free hot dogs.

Ejido Johnson never received so much attention. The town had no police presence, but the tent city has 24-hour police, ambulance service and a mobile medical clinic in the daytime. The Mexican military is serving meals and has set up tents.

As night fell Wednesday, families gathered beneath tarps preparing to end another day. As they fretted over crops and worried about the future, they held to their one certainty: each other.

"We always tried to be protective of one another," Butrón said. "And when people came from outside, we always opened our arms to receive them."

Whatever happens, he said, "I think we're going to continue with the same mentality."

[EMAIL](#) [PRINT](#) [SAVE](#)



Sponsored Listing

Obama Urges Homeowners to Refinance

Take Advantage of Government Refinance Programs Now and Save.
www.SeeRefinanceRates.com

[Buy a link here](#)

Commenting Terms of Use

Add New Comment



Required: Please login below to comment.



Type your comment here.

Name Website (optional)

Email Subscribe to all comments by email

Login and Post

You must be logged in to post a comment.

Showing 3 of 3 comments

Sort by [Newest first](#) [Subscribe by email](#) [Subscribe by RSS](#)



Tuesdayafternoon 04/19/2010 10:41 PM

When will the Mexican government step up and help their own people? That would make an interesting story.

Flag

Like Reply



The Grease man Yesterday 02:16 PM in reply to Tuesdayafternoon

I guess Army soup kitchens, tents, food, and relocation assistance do not count as "help"?

Flag

Like Reply



Wanted_HonestCityMayor 04/19/2010 07:52 AM

1 person liked this.

Thank you for this article. Very little media attention has been given to these rural citizens of Mexico. It's amazing that destruction of the actual land that sustains the community is the key: could the irrigation canal be restored?

Flag

Like Reply

blog comments powered by DISQUS

Sponsored Listing

Obama Urges Homeowners to Refinance

Take Advantage of Government Refinance Programs Now and Save.
www.SeeRefinanceRates.com

Mortgage Refinance 3.25%

\$200,000 mortgage for \$699/month. See Lower Payment NOW - No SSN Req.
Refinance.LoanOffers.com

Free Job Training

Get paid while learning a new career! It's a win-win situation!
JustClickLocal.com

[Buy a link here](#)

INSIDE SIGNONSANDIEGO

NEWS

SPORTS

BUSINESS

LIFESTYLE



[April storm brings out the snowplows](#)

[One is enough to tie Padres for first](#)

[Aviara and Four Seasons cut ties](#)

[Little Italy farmers market a foodie's dream](#)



[NEWS](#) [SPORTS](#) [BUSINESS](#) [OPINION](#) [OBITUARIES](#) [LIFESTYLE](#) [NIGHT & DAY](#) [TRAVEL](#)
[AUTOTRADER.COM](#) [SAN DIEGO BUSINESSES](#) [CONTACT US](#) [FOLLOW US](#) [FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS](#)
[RSS](#) [MOBILE](#)

© Copyright 2010 The San Diego Union-Tribune, LLC