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In Mexico 2 decades ago, quake killed 9,500

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MEXICO CITY - For Mexico City, Hurricane Katrina had strong echoes of the earthquake 20 years ago that toppled buildings, hit the poor hardest and shook Mexicans' faith in government.

The skyline is soaring as the capital marks the 20th anniversary today of the earthquake that killed at least 9,500 people and leveled whole sections of the city. But some scars are still visible, and scientists say the city may be unprepared for the next quake.

"That the poor were the ones that couldn't evacuate (from New Orleans) is something that caught our attention," said Luis Wintergerst, the city's director of civil protection. The 1985 quake also hit the poor hardest, he said.

In the quake's aftermath, civic and neighborhood groups sprang to the rescue, disgusted with the government's weak response. They gave birth to a spirit of grass-roots involvement in public life and politics that remains a source of national pride.

Araceli Santamaria, born the day before the quake and pulled from the rubble of a collapsed hospital, has no doubt about how people will respond to another disaster.

"Are people ready? Morally, yes," said Santamaria, a college student whose education is subsidized by a trust from foreign donors dedicated to 13 surviving "miracle babies" pulled by volunteers from two collapsed hospitals.

Mexican authorities don't have the personnel or enough training to deal with another 1985-magnitude quake, and ordinary people may have no choice but to pitch in, said Roberto Hernandez, president of Topos Mexico, or Mexico Moles, a search-and-rescue group. Organized by young people to dig through the rubble of 1985, it still exists, ready to pitch in if disaster strikes again.

The capital's high-tech skyscrapers include the 55-story Torre Mayor, Latin America's tallest, with a foundation 280 feet below ground and 98 giant quake absorbers.

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