

A Colombian Testimonial: In San Cayetano, Hope Springs Anew

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Fear, anguish, but especially sadness marked the faces of those who were participating at the 13 May 1999 meeting at the San Cayetano Municipal Palace. For years, they had managed to coexist with the steep mountain, the cold, the heavy rains—never imagining that the harsh natural environment they had come to love would deal them a heavy blow.

For days on end, strangers had been coming to town, taking photographs, measuring things, and placing yellow ribbons labeled Danger. Speculation was rife. The mud that slowly descended from the mountain, had gradually been taking over the outskirts of the town, swallowing up entire homes. However, many still hoped the problem would somehow come to an end with the change of the seasons—or perhaps be corrected by all those solemn faced, discreet experts who seemed to know what they were doing.

One day, a helicopter started flying over the town. Some of the inhabitants assumed that it would be taking additional photographs for some new assessment of the creeping mudslide phenomenon. But they were shocked when the craft landed and out stepped Governor Andrés González Díaz, who was immediately driven to the Municipal Place for an urgent meeting with local authorities and emergency relief and disaster management experts. After the residents had been called in for a town-hall meeting, he made his announcement: the town should be evacuated as soon as possible, to prevent another tragedy like the Nevado del Ruiz disaster, in which thousands had perished due to a massive mudslide precipitated by a volcanic eruption.

For several minutes, the residents were too shocked to say anything. San Cayetano, located in the Cundinamarca region, three hours by road from Bogota, was their home, the only home many of them had known all their lives. It was the place where they had their roots. After the initial shock, opinions flared, both in favor and against the move. But it was clear that only an urgent evacuation could preserve them from a catastrophe. On that 13th day of May, on what many considered the final year of a millennium, the inhabitants of San Cayetano said goodbye to their town, to their homes and streets, to the backdrop against which they had lived their daily lives, played, studied, worked, fallen in and out of love, witnessed births and deaths.

An Ounce Of Prevention

Governor González made it clear that, according to all the technical studies, a geological fault had been reactivated, and the highland mud that had coexisted with the town for many decades was descending far more quickly, already causing cracks in the streets and outlying buildings. For once, an imminent disaster could be predicted with deadly accuracy, and its consequences would have been too horrible to contemplate, even for those most loyal to their native town.

The families began to collect their belongings. Many moved to the homes of relatives in nearby municipalities.

Contributions

Training, awareness and community empowerment to develop and carry out action plans for risk reduction are essential components. Petén, Guatemala, Central American Community Network for Risk Management.

