Newsletter

A vision of Latin America and the Caribbean countries

3 April 2024

Weekly Newsletter covering Latin America and the Caribbean issues. A Project between Green Zone Foundation and Telesur.

Andean Mountain Range, Backbone of Planet Earth

Today we will talk about one of the most impressive mountain ranges on the planet, which extends for about 7000 km in distance and crosses seven countries. It has peaks that reach 5000 thousand meters above sea level (m.a.s.l.) where the snow is perpetual given the freezing temperatures.



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The Andes is a mountain range that crosses South America. It has an approximate extension of 7,000 kilometers and runs from the north of Venezuela, through Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, to the south of Chile and Argentina.

It is divided into three regions: the northern Andes, the central Andes and the southern Andes.

Mount Aconcagua, located in Argentina, is the highest mountain in the Americas at 6,961 meters and is also home to the highest volcano on the planet, the Ojo del Salado at 6,891 meters. Each year, an estimated 2,000 people apply for permits to hike the 72 kilometers from the base to the summit. The journey can be done in approximately two weeks in extreme weather conditions, with a permanent temperature of about -15 degrees Celsius and during the night reaching peaks of up to -30 degrees Celsius.

Throughout history, the Andes Mountains have been fundamental for the peoples of the region, both economically and culturally. For the native Andean peoples, the mountain range not only represented a source of natural resources, but also occupied a key place in their worldviews and cultural systems. However, during the Spanish conquest, a systematic process of exploitation and extraction of natural resources took place, to the detriment of the local indigenous communities.

Today it is an undisputed tourist attraction, and each country manages the geographic portion that corresponds to it.

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Venezuela is a country with a tropical climate, but snow falls. Yes, it happens in the Pico Bolivar, a mountain located in the Sierra Nevada belonging to the Andes mountain range and reaching 5000 meters high. It is possible to see snow at that altitude, as well as magnificent landscapes worthy of being photographed.

On the axis of the Central Mountain Range rises one of the best known active volcanic structures in Colombia: the Nevado del Ruiz Volcano. Together with the snow-capped volcanoes Santa Isabel and Tolima, it is part of the protected area of Los Nevados National Natural Park. Precisely, the Nevado del Ruiz volcano is the cause of one of the greatest tragedies in Colombia, known as the tragedy of Armero, which occurred in November 1985. As a result of the eruption of the volcano, the snow melted and caused a flood of mud and debris that were dragged along the riverbed and impacted the town of Armero while its inhabitants slept. We will write about this tragedy soon!

Finally, in Chile, the closest country to the Andes, its capital Santiago grew up at the foot of the mountain and its inhabitants have learned to live with the world-renowned backbone of the planet.

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Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl: From Legend to Stage

The warrior cries out to the gods for his beloved and they turn her into a dormant, peaceful volcano like the princess.

One of the most important romantic myths of Mexican culture is the sad legend of the two volcanoes Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl. The story tells of the kidnapping of the beautiful Iztaccíhuatl at the hands of the evil prince Yaotzin, when he sees her dancing and falls madly in love with her, although she did not love him.





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To her rescue comes the warrior Popocatépetl, who secretly loved her, he embarks on a fight to the death with the monarch, wounding the beautiful lady in the process and killing her.

The warrior cries out to the gods for his beloved and they turn her into a dormant, peaceful volcano like the princess.

Popocatépetl, heartbroken, throws himself at the volcano as a sign of eternal love and the gods decide to turn it into another volcano, a repulsive active one, which manifests its anger, hatred and sadness at losing Iztaccíhuatl.

This beautiful story will be staged by the ballet group of the National Arts Center (CENART). The presentation, according to the CENART, will be very shocking and will use technology and special effects on the stage.

The ballet of Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatépetl will be available on April 4 at 19:00 hours at the Raúl Flores Canelo Theater, Mexico City.

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Armero: Tragedy in Colombia That Could Have Been Avoided

On November 13, 1985, at 4:00 pm, ash begins to fall and at 6:00 pm, fine viscous rain soaks the roofs and streets of Armero.

What really happened, why didn't the authorities in charge of monitoring the volcano issue an early warning about the danger? Why did it take so long for rescue teams to arrive to get the survivors out?



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Survivors say that night they went to sleep as usual. Outside their homes, a thick layer of dust and sticky rain was falling. That day, in the morning, the sky turned gray, the intensity of the ashes and dust foreshadowed the tragedy, but those inhabitants, perhaps due to the lack of information, did not calculate the magnitude of the danger.

Before the Tragedy

At the beginning of 1984, a temperature increase began to be noticed in the volcano. Subsequently, since December 1984, farmers began to see fish dying in the Otún, Recio and Lagunillas river basins. In addition, not only were large amounts of sulfur visible, but there were small explosions that preceded a forest fire. On September 11, 1985, there was an eruption of gases, steam, and rain that fell on nearby municipalities, just two months before the Armero tragedy.

Many months after the tragedy, it was learned that the scientists in charge of monitoring the volcano's activity had done their work and had even passed reports to the highest political and administrative levels, both to the local and national authorities in Bogota. However, this was not taken into account, and there was even so much speculation about a false expectation of catastrophe that the politicians in charge of enforcing the specialists' warnings relaxed to such an extent that they forgot their importance.

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In June of the same year of the disaster, 1985, some specialists headed by Juan Duarte, a researcher assigned to the Geophysical Institute, received the order to recruit and organize a group of experts who would be in charge of monitoring the behavior of the volcano. They fulfilled the assignment, but with great economic limitations that forced them to use local companies and factories to obtain the instruments to place the monitoring and warning systems.

A major concern of the team of experts, once the installation of the devices was completed, was that there was no direct and rapid means of communication between them and the authorities of the Department of Toloma, where the municipality of Armero was located. This created a gap where, in the event of a catastrophe, it was impossible to warn them in advance so that they could begin coordinating evacuation efforts.

Mass Destruction and Deaths

Thus, on November 13, 1985, at 4:00 pm, ashes began to fall and at 6:00 pm, a fine viscous rain soaked the roofs and streets of Armero. Given the intensity of the phenomenon, the regional Red Cross proposed a possible evacuation of the towns of Armero, Mariquita and Honda. These communities were the closest to the volcano as they were located on the banks of the rivers that normally carry the water coming down from the glaciers of the Nevado del Ruiz.

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While all this was happening, the media of the time gave very little importance to the activity of the volcano. Some bulletins were passed on the radio, but none warned of the prelude of destruction and death that was looming over Armero.

When the clocks struck 9:29 p.m., the Nevado del Ruiz exploded its destructive halo, and with it 2% of the ice crown came off. Immediately the ice begins to melt, and an avalanche is formed that detaches from the summit that drags and melts more ice as it moves down the volcano. This landslide subsequently causes the Lagunilla, Chinchiná, Gualí and Azufrado rivers to rise. The water is so strong that the rivers burst out of their beds, causing a second avalanche, now twice as deadly, carrying mud, rocks, trees and everything in its path. Anzoátegui, Fresno, Chinchiná, Palestina, Villamaría, Falan, Casabianca, Herveo, Líbano, Murillo, Villahermosa, Ambalema, Armero, Honda, Lérida, Mariquita, Cambao, Guarinocito, Guayabal, Santuario and Santa Isabel are affected by the mud that traveled approximately 44 kilometers with a speed that reached 80 kilometers per hour.

At 9:49 pm, frustration took over the Civil Defense officials who were in the towns of Ibagué and Murillo, where they had previously been notified from the vicinity of the volcano of the explosion.

They insist repeatedly to contact the emergency system and authorities of Armero but in vain, it was never possible. Chinchiná was the first town hit at 10:45 pm and at 11:30 pm Armero, the most prosperous town of those regions, ceased to exist and 26 thousand people died. The tragedy left 20,611 victims and injured, many of them maimed and severely affected, psychologically devastated, and with incalculable economic losses.

Delayed Response to the Tragedy

In the early morning of November 14, they telephoned the Casa de Nariño, the seat of the executive in Bogotá, to inform the president of the country about the tragedy. They could not believe it, and even refused to inform the president without first corroborating it, while the callers were already seeing the tragedy with their own eyes. Some journalists tell today that without being sent by their agencies or media, they went to the place and that they were never prepared to see what was happening there.

Even late in the morning the rescue forces did not arrive, survivors and inhabitants of other regions were doing rescue work. Some, in their eagerness to pull out the injured alive, did not realize that far from saving them, they were doing more damage because the mud had melted the bodies and when they pressed to remove it, arms and legs were torn off.

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After 12 hours, the first media and specialized personnel arrived to begin the rescue and evacuation of the injured. The deadly avalanche that came down the rivers destroyed bridges, highways and roads, making it difficult to reach Armero. By that time, those who were able to survive had died of thirst, fatigue and heat.

The Colombian army joined the rescue efforts and used helicopters to transport supplies and food to the victims. The government was forced to declare an economic emergency and resorted to the help of international organizations and international solidarity. However, the relocation assistance programs never had the expected coverage or effectiveness, taking into account the millions of dollars in donations and budget allocations referred to above.

Tragedy Could Have Been Avoided

There was strong evidence of what could have happened and ended up happening. The government of the time, headed by Belisario Betancur Cuartas, avoided responsibility and even the tragedy helped him to solve one of the worst political crises of that time, the seizure of the Palace of Justice, which occurred the previous week by a guerrilla group. The media turned a blind eye to this event, which is why the disaster in Armero was so important.

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Cuban and Mexican Scientists Join Efforts Against Alzheimer's.

One of the outstanding projects is the development of the Cneuro-201 molecule, which has shown a powerful neuroprotective capacity in animal models.

Alzheimer's disease (AD) has become a global health challenge due to its devastating impact on quality of life and the growing number of people affected. Describing advances in the fight against this disease, Cuban and Mexican researchers are collaborating on innovative projects to develop treatments and methods of early diagnosis.



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In Cuba, studies led by Doctor of Medical Sciences Juan Libre Rodríguez have estimated that about 10.2% of the population over 65 years suffers from dementia, with Alzheimer's being the main cause. This means that approximately 160,000 people are living with this disease in Cuba today, a figure that is expected to rise to about 273,000 by 2040.

Mitchell Valdés Sosa, Director General of the Center for Neurosciences of Cuba (Cneuro), noted that although the causes of AS are not yet known with certainty, the researchers continue to focus their efforts on developing effective treatments and methods of early diagnosis.

One of the outstanding projects is the development of the Cneuro-201 molecule, which has shown a powerful neuroprotective capacity in animal models. This research, carried out in collaboration with Mexican institutions such as the Center for Research and Advanced Studies of the National Polytechnic Institute (Cinvestav) and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), has favorable prospects for Alzheimer's treatment.

In addition, studies are being conducted to develop early diagnostic methods using Cuban radiopharmaceuticals, such as Cneuro-120. These efforts also include research into treatments for other related conditions, such as head trauma, using NeuroEpo, a product developed at Cuba's Molecular Immunology Center (CIM).

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Dr Valdés Sosa emphasized that these joint efforts demonstrate the commitment of Cuban and Mexican researchers in the fight against Alzheimer's and other neurodegenerative diseases. Although the road ahead is challenging, hope and conviction in the contribution of these advances to the health of both nations remain strong.

AD, a form of dementia that affects memory and cognitive functions, was first described in 1906 by German neurologist Alois Alzheimer. Today, more than 50 million people worldwide are living with this disease, with the number projected to rise to 80 million by 2030 and 152 million by 2050.

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