

## EL SALVADOR (January)

Sunday, January 14<sup>th</sup> 2001, 07h00 am

French media announced a terrible earthquake had stricken and destroyed part of El Salvador the night before. Télécoms sans frontières' headquarters, everyone was mobilized and at 03h00 pm, a team of six members took off to Central America. Once on the site of the disaster, TSF's team was welcomed by Telecom Salvador, who placed at their disposal hotel rooms, vehicles with their drivers, interpreters, all this free of charge.

Huge landslides had entirely destroyed dozens of villages and the number of victims was increasing as time went by. Given that the epicentre of the earthquake was located in the Pacific Ocean (7.9 on Richter's scale), the whole country was affected.

In close co-operation with Telecom Salvador and the COEN (the Salvadorian Crisis Center), télécoms sans frontières created three intervention teams to travel throughout the country with 17 satellite phones and a GAN (allowing the transmission of images and emails via satellite)

Most of the roads were severely damaged, and it often took 2 to 3 hours to join a village with 4WD all-terrain cars. Even a helicopter was used to reach a village that was totally cut off from the rest of the world.



Be it in the East or in the West, the results was the same: the inhabitants had lost everything, and everybody feared another earthquake (more than 2,500 aftershocks were recorded the following days, some of them reaching 5 on Richter's scale) Besides the population lived outside, with very low temperatures at night in some regions. Epidemics of flu and gastro-enteritis, as well as severe respiratory problems developed very fast, the first affected populations being the elders and the babies.

In every village, TSF met shocked Salvadorians, and communication was, once again, their only link with the rest of the world. All of them had relatives in the United States, in Australia, in Guatemala, in Venezuela... Long queues appeared, as everyone wanted to talk to a relative. *"no te preocupas, gracias a Dios estamos bien"* (Don't worry, thank God, we're fine) is a sentence one could hear everywhere, in every village.

Let's not forget that El Salvador is a poor country, and most of its inhabitants can't afford buying a telephone. The only help they could possibly ask for was to come from abroad. So it's very moving to see two brothers, a mother and a son talk to each other, for the first time in years.

During eight days, TSF's teams travelled throughout the country. Satellite phones and prepaid cards were given to Telecoms Salvador's managers for a couple of days, to reach the most areas possibles.

A peninsula was transformed into an island during the earthquake. Thousands of people lived there thanks to fishing, and there was a terrible poverty there. As the earthquake had cut them off from the rest of the world, their situation was more than disastrous: No food, no water... TSF called the Crisis Center to try to help these people.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, TSF completed part of its mission. Indeed, the French Sécurité Civile (who works in the field with its German counterpart) needed help from TSF as concerns data and video transmission. A logistician, equipped with a "GAN M4", stayed another week to complete this mission. Every night (due to the time difference between Europe and America ), daily reports (pictures and data) were sent to the French Foreign office, which appreciate this new kind of communications.

TSF's mission ended on January 29<sup>th</sup>, and at the same time another team was sent to India, that had been stricken by the same kind of earthquake.