

Opinion: Panama's active faults and the need for better preparedness

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Summary

A La Prensa opinion piece by an architect explains the tectonic setting behind the 9 October earthquake and argues Panama must improve building codes, urban planning and public preparedness.

Details (summary of the article)

La Prensa published an opinion column by an architect and land-planning specialist reflecting on the magnitude 7.8 earthquake of Friday 9 October, which was felt from Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí across to Darién. He explains that Panama sits on a microplate where the Cocos, Nazca, Caribbean and South American plates converge, and that research by the University of Panama's Institute of Geosciences shows such quakes are the normal expression of movement along the microplate's boundaries. Preliminary civil-protection assessments found hundreds of homes damaged in nearly every province, from small cracks to total loss, forcing evacuations and the opening of shelters and field medical posts; hundreds of schools and other infrastructure were also hit, requiring emergency work to restore services such as drinking water. The author criticises the public's panicked reaction - people pushing on stairways, jammed streets blocking ambulances and rescue units - and argues residents must learn to stay calm, use evacuation routes and give way to emergency vehicles. He describes the physical effects of strong shaking: collapse of weak buildings, ground cracking, soil liquefaction in water-saturated terrain, and tsunami alerts or sudden sea-level changes along both coasts. Key active zones include the Panama fracture zone and Punta Burica, the North Panama deformed belt, the Azuero peninsula and eastern Panama. With the isthmus moving about three centimetres a year, strain keeps building on faults, which is why he calls for updated construction codes, better civil engineering and more orderly city growth.

Original (es)

El despertar de las fallas: el silencioso poder bajo nuestros suelos

La actividad tectónica bajo Panamá exige fortalecer la prevención, preparar a la población y orientar la construcción y el crecimiento de nuestras ciudades.