

Why Panama's buildings held up: seismic codes under scrutiny after the quake

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Summary

La Prensa interviews engineer Sion Atencio on Panama's structural code and why older buildings, including the former Ministry of Health building in Chiriquí, should be inspected after the 9 October earthquake.

Details (summary of the article)

In La Prensa, Sion Atencio, the Engineers' Association representative to the Technical Board of Engineering and Architecture, argues that Panama's strict structural code helped limit damage in the 9 October earthquake. Panama began drafting anti-seismic rules in 1976, modelled partly on California's code (the San Andreas fault region); the 1984 Panamanian Structural Code made compliance mandatory, with updates in 1994, 2004 and 2021. The rules set design parameters based on seismic hazard, soil type and building use, with stricter criteria for hospitals and schools, which means more steel and concrete and higher building costs. Atencio says he has opposed attempts to relax the standards. The concern now is older buildings erected before the mandatory rules: he would review the historic quarters of Panama City and Colón, municipal and heritage buildings, Casa Wilcox in Colón and the old Ministry of Health building in Chiriquí - not because they are necessarily unsafe, but because they merit technical assessment. Researchers at the Technological University of Panama are modelling old buildings' behaviour. Bridges were also discussed: the Centenario was designed with seismic features, while the Bridge of the Americas needs post-quake inspection. The consultative committee was due to meet after the earthquake to consider improvements, including completing the mapping of spectral acceleration curves.

Original (es)

Terremoto en Panamá: el secreto de las edificaciones, las normas sísmicas y la falla de San Andrés

La norma estructural del país establece criterios según la amenaza sísmica, el suelo y el uso de cada edificio. Pero las construcciones antiguas pueden no cumplir las exigencias técnicas actuales.