Lessons Learned From the Northridge Earthquake

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Five years after the 6.8 Northridge earthquake in San Francisco, a review of the damage done by that quake, and efforts to counter the forces of another quake with changes in building construction.

Keywords


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"Lessons Learned From the Northridge Earthquake." George Lewis, correspondent. NBC Nightly News.
BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:

NBC NEWS IN DEPTH tonight, the lessons of a killer earthquake. Americans have never witnessed the kind of disaster that Turkey is dealing with right now, but parts of this country a lot of Americans live with a near constant threat of a big quake. Each year, the United States is shaken by up to 2,000 earthquakes, from the minor tremor of about three on the Richter scale and up. About 325 of them happen in California. Just last night, north of San Francisco, a tremor measuring 5.0, a moderate quake; it shook buildings, broke windows, and rattled nerves. The last big one in California, the Northridge quake, as it was known, in some ways is still being felt five years later. NBC's George Lewis reports tonight, IN DEPTH.

GEORGE LEWIS reporting:

The Northridge area of Los Angeles, January 17th, 1994, a quake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale, one full point less than the quake in Turkey.

In Los Angeles, 62 dead, almost 12,000 injured. Property damage: $40 billion, the most costly natural disaster in US history. Rescue workers found 16 of the dead in this collapsed building, the Northridge Gardens Apartments. Today, the old apartments are gone, replaced by these new apartments and condominiums. The result of painful lessons learned from all the destruction here, officials have overhauled building codes, hoping to prevent structures from collapsing in the future. Contractor Todd Dutton says the new codes call for tougher exterior walls.

Mr. TODD DUTTON: Today, now we have to apply half-inch plywood to the outside, put down a hold-down system into the existing foundation.

LEWIS: Fires from broken gas lines are a major hazard in a quake, so among the new requirements, gas meters with motion detectors that automatically shut off in earthquakes, and metal fireplace chimneys designed not to crumble. That extra measure of safety does not come inexpensively. Take this construction project, for example. A 1,000-square-foot add-on to a one-family home. Before the
earthquake, the cost would have been $230,000. Now, with the tougher building codes, the cost is raised 30,000 to 260. A lot of money, but a bargain compared to the $273 million cost of retrofitting the Los Angeles city hall damaged in the Northridge quake. Construction crews are mounting the building on special rubber shock absorbers to make it more quake resistant.

Mr. CHRISTOPHER MARTIN (Architect): This is designed to separate the building from the ground motion of an 8.6 event on the San Andreas fault.

LEWIS: As earthquake scientists simulate the effects of future quakes, they're discovering some alarming facts. A computer simulation run today by a company called EQE International, depicting a 7.4 magnitude quake on the Newport/Inglewood fault in Southern California, the company forecasts that sort of quake could cause between three and 6,000 deaths, injure between 100 and 150,000 people, and cause between 80 and $130 billion in property damage. Kennedy High School, heavily damaged in the Northridge quake, five years later the gym is being replaced and other improvements made. But many schools in California have not been upgraded for safety.

So now some in Los Angeles watch the devastation in Turkey and wonder if they are prepared enough for the inevitable. George Lewis, NBC News, Los Angeles.