

The Inferno of La Cruz

Thursday, 17 January, 2008

Our rig came off the ship at 6:20AM on Sunday, 14 January.

We had a chance to partially inspect the rig later that day and knew it was damaged, perhaps destroyed. We sold our house to clear the decks for these years of travel, so this meant we may have lost our home. It was a quiet ride back to the hotel.

Back in our room I wandered out onto the balcony to listen to the waves, watch the sunset and contemplate things.

The vista was flawed by the one thing that strikes mortal fear into anyone from San Diego, a raging wildfire in the densely populated hills above Valparaiso.



Over the last few days the local TV news and papers have been filled with coverage of the fire, dubbed by the media the "Inferno of La Cruz."

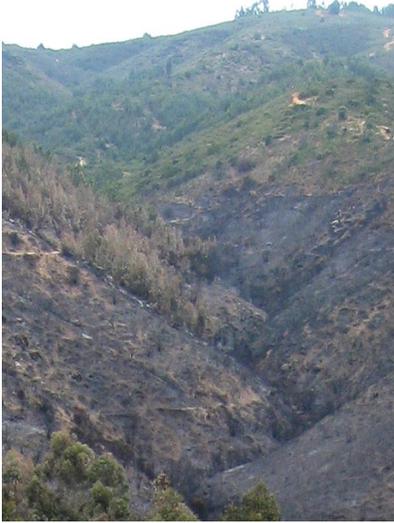
In total 88 homes were destroyed and over 350 people made homeless. One woman died of burns over 90% of her body. A volunteer fireman is still in critical condition after being crushed by a burning tree. (All the firemen in Chile are volunteers.) Many local residents were burned as they rescued family members or fled the flames.

Yesterday we asked our guide, interpreter and friend, Jorge Valdes, to take us up to the area to see if there was anything we could do to directly help those impacted.

Today, we visited the neighborhood.

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The fire started when a couple of young boys were playing with matches up in this canyon.



The fire roared down the canyon into the La Cruz neighborhood.



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And, as fires do, simply destroyed everything in its path.



This disaster scene shared many similar characteristics to other places we've been to while providing volunteer relief.

There were piles and bags of clothes donated by the local community. Everybody has some old or unused clothes around the house. They are quick to gather and easy to deliver. This neighborhood was swimming in donated clothes.



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There were groups of church volunteers, including the kids working in the neighborhood church basement cooking donated food.



Photo by Stephanie Hackney

There were groups of local men volunteering to clear debris, all uncomfortably wearing unfamiliar hardhats.



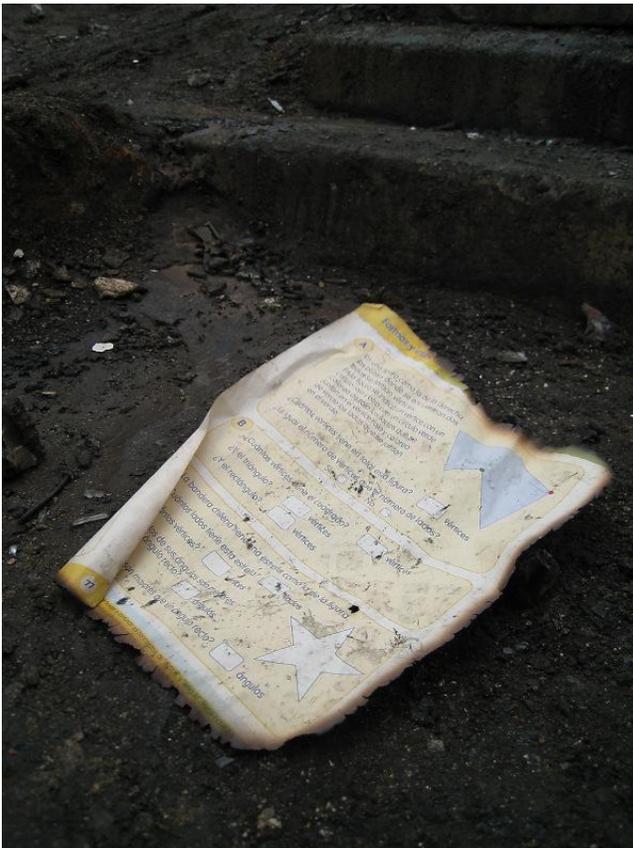
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There were utility crews restoring services.



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But mostly, like all disaster scenes, there were the constant reminders that for these people, for these families, for these children, last Sunday, their world ceased to exist.



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Now, their doors led to nowhere.



Their family meals were taken curbside.



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And there would be no more bicycle rides.



The Inferno of La Cruz

But even in the ruins, children still play.



And our new friend Nicholas, whose family lost everything in the fire, including his father's lifetime of football trophies, whose father was burned rescuing Nick's sister from the fire, who has nothing but the blue t-shirt on his back, can still find a reason to have fun with his friends.



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And, out of the tragedies of the ashes, injuries and death, miracles emerge.

We saw television news coverage of the fire as it was burning. I'd estimate the winds were blowing at least Force 5, maybe 6.

The fire burned right up to the blue building in the background of this shot.



That blue building is this little church.



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During and after the fire Steph and I saw TV news video of the homes burning on this street. In the videos, the wind was blowing so hard the flames were extending horizontally out over the street.



The church's pastor, seen here, told our interpreter, guide and friend, Jorge, the roaring wind blew the flames alongside, up and over the church.

The house next door to the church, that once stood a few feet behind the pastor in this shot, was gone. Everything between where the fire started and where the pastor stood was gone.

We looked at the church. We walked along the entire fire side of the church. There was a little charring in a few small spots on the church, otherwise it was untouched.

I don't know how many firemen were deployed for the Inferno of La Cruz. I have heard it was every fireman in Valparaiso and half of the available force from Viña del Mar. If that's true it was probably at least 200 firefighters.

I don't know how many pieces of firefighting apparatus were deployed on the Inferno of La Cruz. If the local anecdotes are accurate there were at least a few dozen.

I don't know where any of the firefighters and their equipment were physically located in relation to the fire, this neighborhood or this church.

I don't know any of those hard numbers. I don't know with certainty any of those facts.

What I do know is that the raging, wind whipped firestorm that I saw with my own eyes stopped right there, in a narrow walkway alongside a tiny church perched high on the hills overlooking Valparaiso.

I don't have any explanation for it. I don't know if anyone ever will.

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But I can tell you, with certainty, the people of La Cruz who started that Sunday with next to nothing and ended the day with just plain nothing, the people who are sleeping under tarps and tents, the people whose homes and every single thing in them vanished beneath a wall of flame, the people who lost family, friends and neighbors to injury and death, desperately need some good news in their neighborhood. In their eyes, from the death and destruction of the Inferno of La Cruz the church has emerged, as if a phoenix, as the Miracle of La Cruz.