

“The town centre was full of people waiting for news of their friends and others carrying coffins up to the site, some very small. It was a very bad day.”



LOOKING FOR SURVIVORS: A crowd of people look on as volunteer workers search the mudslide for survivors and bodies.

Australian PHIL EICHINSKI was backpacking through Guatemala last week when the floods hit. Answering a call for volunteers, he went to Santiago to look for survivors in the mud. He took the photographs on this page and sent *Te Waha Nui* this email describing his dramatic experiences.

Lake of mud swamps Guatemalan villages

Santiago, Guatemala: October 14

Hi everyone, I don't know if news about what's happening in Guatemala is big wherever you are, but 600 and something people have been found and hundreds are still missing. Local newspapers concentrated on Santiago where I was digging, so most of the dead were probably there.

Three weeks ago it started to rain every afternoon, but that is normal for the rainy season. Then last weekend it started raining hard and didn't stop for four days and all the streets turned to rivers. At first I assumed that was normal too but then we found out that it was because of a hurricane.

On Monday night the power went out but that had happened every day since I arrived just because San Pedro is a bit crap like that.

But this time it didn't go back on. After a few days people looked very fed up with the rain and we started hearing about floods in other towns and people dying.

Soon refugees arrived in San Pedro by boat from other towns. They were identifiable in the street because the traditional clothing is unique to each town. We helped a friend who has a restaurant to cook all the food that would go bad without power or refrigeration and take it to them.

We also found out that all the roads had been blocked from the other towns on the lake because of mudslides. I had planned to leave on the weekend when the rain started but because the weather was bad I chose to wait a bit, but now everyone was trapped.

Then, on Thursday night at a candle-lit bar with no music and warm beer (which I could not afford because the banks had been shut since the power went out). I was told that volunteers were being requested to go to Santiago which is the next town on the lake to help dig for people. It

was still possible to get between the towns on the lake by boat. So I went on Friday and then I saw really how bad it was.

Above the town closer to the mountains there had been a massive mudslide which knocked over everything so that there was just a big lake of mud, maybe six football fields long. We could not even walk on it because if you did you would sink to your waist and be stuck.

So, in the absence of any power tools or machines (except one chainsaw) people cut down trees with machetes and made paths of leaves and branches so we could walk on the mud to where they thought there was a house and started digging with farm tools. But it was really hard to dig because the mud was like liquid — it was hard even to balance on the branches.

Anyway we dug and dug until the rain came again and everyone had to get off because with more rain maybe it would slide again.

Where I was digging, a family was buried. Two had escaped but we didn't get to them because there were too many heavy fallen trees which had to be moved by hand.

We saw bodies pulled out from other dig sites. There was no hope at all of finding people alive.

The town centre was full of people waiting for news of their friends and others carrying coffins up to the site, some very small. It was a very bad day.

The next day we went to help in a different town which was very badly damaged in the centre but where no one died because it was a flood rather than a mudslide.

We spent the morning digging out the school, draining the water away and recovering whatever we could from it. Later we helped to build a bridge so the people who still had homes there could get around the town.

There were raging rivers all through the town centre, including one that went in one door of the church and out the other.

Meanwhile San Pedro was running out of food and gas and water because the pipes had stopped flowing five days before. I was down to two dollars as banks were still closed and the ATM doesn't work without power or phone lines.

Right now weather forecasters predict the power will be out for at least another week and there is a possibility of another hurricane coming.

They had kind of opened a road from Panajachel - another half-destroyed town on the lake - so we went there, looking for a way out of the area.

First a boat to Panajachel, then a ride in an army truck as far as it could go, then a walk over an unstable bridge, then a pickup truck from the other side to the next town and then a bus from there to Guatemala City. So that is that. Hope you are all well. Send me news.

DRAMATIC SCENES: All the photos were taken in the Santiago Atitlan district.

As far as I know from reading the BBC they are abandoning searches for people and calling the towns around the lakes mass graves.

All tourists were evacuated from San Pedro the day after I left, possibly for fear of diseases. But I think also because there was not much supply of food and water and it is just better to have the people who don't live there away.

Volunteers are still going from Antigua to clean up destroyed towns but are being kept away from areas where people were buried by the landslides.



RIGHT: The body of a small child is pulled from the mud in the Santiago Atitlan region.

BELOW: Villagers and volunteers dig in the mud with farm implements as their only tools.



SANTIAGO ATITLAN: Phil Eichinski was visiting the south-west of Guatemala between Guatemala City and San Marcos.