

Deadly Explosion and Its Aftermath

TRAGEDY IN SAN JUAN BRINGS VOLUNTEERS AND A CHIROPRACTOR

Editorial Staff

The bottom three floors of the Humberto Vidal Building in Rio Piedras, San Juan were gutted from a natural gas explosion, killing 30, and entombing six others in the rubble.

Dr. Carlos Selles, DC, left his private office to provide chiropractic care to the on-site volunteer workers. "It was the only way that I knew of to give a hand in this disaster."

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- At 8:30 a.m. on November 21, 1996, in this capital city of some 438,000 inhabitants lying 1,000 miles south southeast of Miami in the Caribbean Sea, a horrific explosion rocked the Humberto Vidal Building in Rio Piedras as employees began the workday.

The first three floors of the five story building were gutted and collapsed, filling the basement level with an enormous amount of debris, and burying many of the building's office personnel. The disaster took the lives of 30 people, and many more were injured. To date, six people are unaccounted for, presumed crushed under the rubble.

The frightening and deadly explosion is attributed to a natural gas leak in the pipes running under the Humberto Vidal Building. The explosion was all the more tragic in that the management of the building and other surrounding buildings had recently complained of an odor emanating from the environs. The gas company came to the area to investigate and do the necessary repair work. The investigation, as they say, is still in progress.

The catastrophe prompted the governor of Puerto Rico, Dr. Pedro Rosello, to declare a three-day national mourning period.

The explosion affected many inhabitants of Puerto Rico, and many islanders came to the disaster site to lend a helping hand to the survivors, those still trapped, and assist the rescue workers.

The rescue/cleanup operation was particularly precarious given the weakened structure of the building. With the on-site engineers warning that the vibrations of mechanical equipment might cause the building to further collapse, the task of clearing away the rubble and searching for survivors had to be accomplished by hand. Clearing the debris put the lives of the volunteers in danger, and took a emotional toll on everyone involved. The volunteers worked around the clock in two 12-hour shifts for an entire week.

Dr. Carlos A. Selles, DC, a Life College graduate (1994) with two practices in Puerto Rico, one in the capital and one in San Lorenzo, heard the conditions under which the volunteers were working, and left his private office to provide chiropractic care to the on-site volunteers. "It was the only way that I knew of to give a hand in this disaster," Dr. Selles explained.

Dr. Selles was assigned a room where the workers retreated for periods of much needed rest. It was here that he was able to provide chiropractic care to about 50 appreciative volunteers a day.

After a week of backbreaking labor by the rescue workers, any hope of finding further survivors was abandoned as futile. At that point, continuing recovery efforts were deemed an unnecessary danger for the workers. The practical decision was made to protect the collapsed area and demolish the standing floors. Only after that was accomplished would the search and clearing operation continue.

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