

= Omayra Sánchez =

Omayra Sánchez Garzón (August 28 , 1972 ? November 16 , 1985) was a Colombian girl killed in Armero , department of Tolima , by the 1985 eruption of the Nevado del Ruiz volcano when she was 13 years old . Volcanic debris mixed with ice to form massive lahars (volcanically induced mudslides , landslides , and debris flows) that rushed into the river valleys below the mountain , killing nearly 23 @, @ 000 people and destroying Armero and 13 other villages .

After a lahar demolished her home , Sánchez became pinned beneath the debris of her house , where she remained trapped in water for three days . Her plight was documented as she descended from calmness into agony . Her courage and dignity touched journalists and relief workers , who put great efforts into comforting her . After 60 hours of struggling , she died , likely as a result of either gangrene or hypothermia . Her death highlighted the failure of officials to respond correctly to the threat of the volcano , contrasted with the efforts of volunteer rescue workers to reach and treat trapped victims , despite inadequate supplies and equipment .

Sánchez became internationally famous through a photograph of her taken by the photojournalist Frank Fournier shortly before she died . When published worldwide it generated considerable controversy ; it was later designated the World Press Photo of the Year for 1986 . Sánchez has remained a lasting figure in popular culture , remembered through music , literature , and commemorative articles .

= = Background = =

On November 13 , 1985 , the Nevado del Ruiz volcano erupted . Pyroclastic flows exploding from the crater melted the mountain 's icecap , forming lahars (volcanic mudflows and debris flows) which cascaded into river valleys below . One lahar , consisting of three pulses , did most of the damage . Traveling at 6 meters (20 ft) per second , the first pulse enveloped most of the town of Armero , killing up to 20 @, @ 000 people ; the two later pulses weakened buildings . Another lahar killed 1 @, @ 800 people in nearby Chinchiná . In total 23 @, @ 000 people were killed and 13 villages in addition to Armero were destroyed .

Loss of life was exacerbated by the authorities ' failure to take costly preventive measures in the absence of clear signs of imminent danger . There had been no substantial eruption of the volcano since 1845 , which contributed to complacency ; locals called the volcano the " Sleeping Lion " .

In September 1985 , as earthquakes and phreatic eruptions rocked the area around the volcano , officials began planning for evacuation . A hazard map was prepared in October ; it highlighted the danger from falling ash and rock near Murillo , Santa Isabel , and Líbano , as well as the threat of lahars in Mariquita , Guayabal , Chinchiná , and Armero . The map was poorly distributed to those at highest risk : many survivors had never heard of it , though several major newspapers had featured it . Henry Villegas of the Colombian Institute of Mining and Geology stated that the maps clearly demonstrated Armero would be affected by the lahars , but had " met with strong opposition from economic interests . " He said that the short time between the map 's preparation and the eruption hindered timely distribution .

The Colombian Congress criticised scientific and civil defense agencies for scaremongering , and the government and army were preoccupied with the guerrilla campaign in Bogotá , the national capital , which was then at its height .

The death toll was increased by the lack of early warnings , unwise land use , as villages were built in the likely path of lahars , and the lack of preparedness in communities near the volcano . Colombia 's worst natural disaster , the Armero tragedy (as it came to be known) was the second @-@ deadliest volcanic disaster of the 20th century (surpassed only by the 1902 eruption of Mount Pelée) . It was the fourth @-@ deadliest eruption recorded since 1500 AD . Its lahars were the deadliest in volcanic history .

= = Life = =

Omayra Sánchez lived in the neighborhood of Santander with her parents Álvaro Enrique , a rice and sorghum collector , and María Aleida , along with her brother Álvaro Enrique and aunt María Adela Garzón . Prior to the eruption , her mother had traveled to Bogotá on business . The night of the disaster , Omayra and her family were awake , worrying about the ashfall from the eruption , when they heard the sound of an approaching lahar . After it hit , Omayra became trapped under her home 's concrete and other debris and could not free herself . When rescue teams tried to help her , they realized that her legs were trapped under her house 's roof . Sources differ as to the degree to which Sánchez was trapped . Zeiderman (2009) said she was " trapped up to her neck " , while Barragán (1987) said that she was trapped up to her waist .

Sánchez was immobilized from the waist down , but her upper body was free of the concrete and mud . For the first few hours after the mudflow hit , she was covered by concrete but got her hand through a crack in the debris . After a rescuer noticed her hand protruding from a pile of debris , he and others cleared tiles and wood over the course of a day . Once the girl was freed from the waist up , her rescuers attempted to pull her out , but found the task impossible without breaking her legs in the process . Each time a person pulled her , the water pooled around her , rising so that it seemed she would drown if they let her go , so rescue workers placed a tire around her body to keep her afloat . Divers discovered that Sánchez 's legs were caught under a door made of bricks , with her aunt 's arms clutched tightly around her legs and feet .

= = Death = =

Despite her predicament , Sánchez remained relatively positive : she sang to Germán Santa María Barragán , a journalist who was working as a volunteer , asked for sweet food , drank soda , and agreed to be interviewed . At times , she was scared , and prayed or cried . On the third night , Sánchez began hallucinating , saying that she did not want to be late for school , and mentioned a maths exam . Near the end of her life , Sánchez 's eyes reddened , her face swelled , and her hands whitened . At one point she asked the people to leave her so they could rest . Hours later the workers returned with a pump and tried to save her , but her legs were bent under the concrete as if she was kneeling , and it was impossible to free her without severing her legs . Lacking the surgical equipment to save her from the effects of an amputation , the doctors present agreed that it would be more humane to let her die . In all , Sánchez suffered for nearly three nights (roughly 60 hours) before she died at approximately 10 : 05 A.M. on November 16 from exposure , most likely from gangrene or hypothermia .

Her brother and mother survived the lahars ; her father and sister died . Her mother expressed her feelings about Omayra 's death : " It is horrible , but we have to think about the living ... I will live for my son , who only lost a finger . "

As the public became aware of Sánchez 's situation through the media , her death became a symbol of the failure of officials to properly assist victims who could have been saved . Controversy broke out after descriptions of the shortages were released in newspapers , disproving what officials had previously indicated : that they had used the best of their supplies . Volunteer relief workers said that there was such a lack of resources that supplies as basic as shovels , cutting tools , and stretchers ran out . The rescue process was impeded by large crowds and disorganization . An unnamed police officer said that the government should have depended on human resources to alleviate the problems and that the system of rescue was disorganized . Colombia 's Minister of Defense , Miguel Uribe , said he " understood criticism of the rescue effort " , but said that Colombia was " an undeveloped country " that did not " have that kind of equipment . "

= = Photograph = =

Frank Fournier , a French reporter who landed in Bogotá on November 15 , took a photograph of Sánchez in her final days , titled " The Agony of Omayra Sánchez " . When he reached Armero at dawn on the 16th , a farmer directed him to Sánchez , who by then had been trapped for nearly three days and was near @-@ deserted . Fournier later described the town as " very haunting , "

with " eerie silence " punctuated by screaming . He said that he took the photograph feeling that he could only " report properly on the courage and the suffering and the dignity of the little girl " in his attempt to publicize the disaster 's need for relief efforts , feeling otherwise " powerless " .

At the time , there was international awareness of the disaster . Sánchez was one of the victims at the center of the associated controversy over responsibility for the destructive aftermath . The image captured international attention . According to an unnamed BBC reporter , " Many were appalled at witnessing so intimately what transpired to be the last few hours of Omayra 's life . " After the photo was published in Paris Match , many accused Fournier of being " a vulture . " He responded ,

" I felt the story was important for me to report and I was happier that there was some reaction ; it would have been worse if people had not cared about it I believe the photo helped raise money from around the world in aid and helped highlight the irresponsibility and lack of courage of the country 's leaders . "

The picture later won the World Press Photo of the Year for 1985 .

= = Legacy = =

The Armero catastrophe came shortly after the M @-@ 19 guerrilla group 's raid and subsequent Palace of Justice siege on November 6 , worsening an already chaotic situation . After Sánchez 's death , blame for it and for the Armero tragedy fell on the Colombian government for its inaction and general indifference to warning signs prior to the volcano 's eruption .

The Nevado del Ruiz volcano is still active , according to the Volcano Watch Center in Colombia . Melting only 10 percent of the ice would produce mudflows with a volume of up to 200 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 cubic meters (7 @.@ 06 × 10⁹ cu ft) ? similar to the mudflow that destroyed Armero in 1985 . Such lahars can travel up to 100 kilometers (62 mi) along river valleys in a few hours . Estimates show that up to 500 @,@ 000 people living in the Combeima , Chinchiná , Coello @-@ Toche , and Guali valleys are at risk , and 100 @,@ 000 of these are considered to be at high risk . The city of Armero no longer exists . The site was commemorated as a memorial with Christian crosses and a small monument to Sánchez .

In the years following the eruption , Sánchez has been repeatedly commemorated , especially in newspapers like El Tiempo . Many victims of the disaster were commemorated , but Sánchez in particular has attracted lasting attention in popular poetry , novels , and music .

For example , a punk rock band formed in Chile in 2008 named themselves Omayra Sánchez ; they express their " discontent that they feel with the negligence on the part of the people who in this day and age run the world " . Adiós , Omayra : La catástrofe de Armero (1988) , written by Eduardo Santa as a response to the eruption , depicts the girl 's last days of life in detail and cites her in its introduction as an eternal symbol of the catastrophe . In No Morirás (1994) , Germán Santa María Barragán writes that of all the horrors he saw at Armero , nothing was more painful than seeing the face of Omayra Sánchez under the ruins of her house . Isabel Allende 's short story , " And of Clay Are We Created " (" De barro estamos hechos ") , is told from the perspective of a reporter who tries to help a girl trapped under the fireplace of her ruined home . Allende later wrote , " Her [Sánchez 's] big black eyes , filled with resignation and wisdom , still pursue me in my dreams . Writing the story failed to exorcise her ghost . "

To try to prevent repetition of such a disaster , the government of Colombia created the Oficina Nacional para la Atención de Desastres (National Office for Disaster Preparedness) , now known as the Dirección de Prevención y Atención de Desastres (Directorate for Disaster Prevention and Preparedness) . All Colombian cities were directed to plan for natural disasters .