

Rare Australian earthquake triggers panic in Melbourne

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The 5.8 magnitude quake was one of the strongest to hit Australia in years [James Ross/AAP Image via Reuters]

Melbourne, September 22 (RHC)-- A rare earthquake rattled southeastern Australia on Wednesday morning, shaking buildings, knocking down walls and sending panicked residents running into the streets of Melbourne, the country's second-biggest city.

The magnitude 5.9 seism struck at about 9:15am (23:15 GMT on Tuesday) near the rural town of Mansfield in the state of Victoria, about 180 km (112 miles) northeast of Melbourne, Geoscience Australia

said.

The quake, one of the country's biggest on record, was at a depth of 10 km (six miles). Hundreds of aftershocks were detected, with one measuring 4.0 magnitude. Emergency services reported damage to buildings in Melbourne, and more than 1,000 homes across the state were without power.

Debris littered roads in the popular shopping area around Melbourne's Chapel Street, with bricks apparently coming loose from buildings.

Zume Phim, 33, owner of the Oppen café in the area, said he rushed onto the street when the earthquake hit. "The whole building was shaking. All the windows, the glass, was shaking – like a wave of shaking," he told the AFP news agency. "I have never experienced that before. It was a little bit scary."

The quake on Wednesday was more significant than the country's deadliest tremor, a 5.6 seism in Newcastle in 1989, in which 13 people died.

This was "the biggest event in southeast Australia for a long time", Mike Sandiford a geologist at the University of Melbourne told AFP. "We had some very big ones at magnitude six in the late 1800s, though precise magnitudes are not well known."

An earthquake of this size is expected every "10-20 years in southeast Australia, the last was Thorpdale in 2012," he added. "This is significantly bigger." The mayor of Mansfield, Mark Holcombe, said he was in his home office on his farm when the quake struck and ran outside for safety.

Emergency and rescue workers examine a damaged building in the popular Chapel Street shopping area of Melbourne after a rare earthquake hit the area [William West/AFP]

"I have been in earthquakes overseas before and it seemed to go on longer than I have experienced before," Holcombe told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. "The other thing that surprised me was how noisy it was. It was a real rumbling like a big truck going past."

He knew of no serious damage near the earthquake's epicentre, although some residents reported problems with telecommunications. No tsunami threat was issued to the Australian mainland, islands or territories, the country's Bureau of Meteorology said in a statement.

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