

Laguna Niguel Slide Destroys 7 Dwellings

Robert Ourlian and Frank Messina, Special To The Times, L.A. Times

Heavy rains may have accelerated what geologists have predicted for several years.

March 20, 1998 - Laguna Niguel - With the terrifying sounds of splintering wood and shattering glass, a terraced slope supporting a community of upscale homes partially collapsed in a predawn landslide Thursday, demolishing two houses and toppling five condominium units at the base of the hill.

"You could hear my house creak. You could see the retaining walls move," said Greg Burns, 21, one of 24 people ordered to evacuate about 3 a.m. as the hillside crumbled around his Crown Cove condo. No one was injured.

But residents said they believe the heavy rains beginning in December accelerated the collapse.

"All day long yesterday, the firetrucks, cop cars and engineers told us we were fine," said Michelle Bennett, who rents one of the condos and was ordered to leave in the middle of the night. "Then at 3:15 a.m., they began pounding on our doors and yelling at us to get out, get out.

"I sat here and watched those houses fall down at 4 a.m.," she said. "Now my house is holding up this hill and those mansions on top."

Residents wrenched from their condos because of the slide were allowed back in later to hastily wrap televisions in blankets, bag dishes and toss pillows onto piles at the side of a road while they awaited moving trucks to cart them out of their endangered units.

The man-made hill, which has been the subject of lawsuits since 1994 because of shifting and cracking in walls and pavement below it, began noticeably moving after storms in December, prompting the evacuation of five houses on the ridge top and five condos at the base. In February, residents of four more condos were asked to move.

On Wednesday afternoon there was more movement, and a retaining wall began to slump, triggering several more voluntary evacuations.

About 1:45 a.m. Thursday, Sandra Paulin, a single mother of two, awoke in her condo to the sound of cracking and popping glass.

"It was like gunshots," said Paulin, whose dwelling was spared. "It was a terrible, terrible noise-- things snapping, glass breaking."

The sound was the ground collapsing, toppling two of the evacuated houses at the top of

the hill.

"When that hill went, it sounded like thunder," said Ann Andrews, a ridge-top resident of Via Estoril. "I was terrified."

Just after 3 a.m., firefighters told residents of two of the condo buildings-- eight units in all-- to evacuate, giving them only minutes to leave with keys, valuables and precious belongings.

Within an hour, the shifting earth upended the five condos that had been evacuated in December, slamming their second-story balconies into the ground and shredding the 8-inch-thick asphalt like ribbon.

Condo association president Michael DeStefano, who was ordered to evacuate in December, was back at the complex Thursday to meet with city officials and residents.

"Everyone kept telling us, 'The hill's going to let loose.' We just didn't know when," DeStefano said.

On behalf of residents, the Crown Valley Parkway Condominium Assn. is suing the developers of Niguel Summit and that neighborhood's homeowners association for alleged defective grading and workmanship that the plaintiffs say contributed to the failure of the hill.

Attorney Rachel Miller, representing the condo owners, said Thursday that the developers improperly packed the 275,000 tons of fill used to build the slope from a 2% grade to a 30% grade. Among those sued were home builder J.M. Peters Inc., now owned by Capital Pacific Holdings, and Hon Development.

The condos were constructed in 1981, according to residents and attorneys, before the slope was built up.

In a statement Thursday, Capital Pacific said that insurance companies for the developers have agreed to pay relocation costs for residents who were moved in December and that experts have been hired to study the hillside.

A spokesman for Capital Pacific in Newport Beach said the company bought Peters in 1992, five years after the homes, on Via Estoril and adjacent streets, were built. The statement also said Capital Pacific had purchased Hon's interest in the development.

Walking with a group of geologists Thursday along Via Estoril, Kathy Strong, an attorney for the Niguel Summit Homeowners Assn., would only say that "our main concern at this time is looking out for the safety of the homeowners."

City Manager Tim Casey said both developments were built before Laguna Niguel incorporated in 1989. The city is not party to the lawsuits and is not involved in the legal

squabble over the filled-in slope and engineered terraces.

"A lot of [local development] was terraced, but I can't quantify it for you," he said. "It's a hilly community."

The two houses that tumbled down the hillside were on Via Estoril, several hundred feet above the condos. Both had been evacuated in December, as were three other houses on the street, where the hillside has been eroding for several years.

Two more have since been pronounced uninhabitable, and the owners of an additional two have been urged to leave by officials' posting of yellow tags. On Thursday, throngs gathered along Clubhouse Drive, where the hillside's erosion laid bare the foundations of three of the evacuated homes.

One of those belonged to Tim Rager and his family. Most of their backyard had disappeared, and the home was basically a loss.

"It's going to be impossible for us to keep it," Rager said as he watched emergency vehicles drive onto Via Estoril. "How can you put a dollar value on how frustrating it is to know that we will be forced to move to a place where we don't want to live?"

Rager said he moved out after the first El Nino rainstorm in December.

"We were told that the slopes were starting to experience significant movement," he said. "Some said that we were overreacting by moving."

The Ragers and other Via Estoril residents filled up the moving vans, left the neighborhood and waited.

In recent months, cracked patios and buckling pavement have been commonplace on the street-- enough so that hilltop resident Andrews keeps a video camera handy to document the damage.

So when the hills continued to slide, she grabbed the camera and videotaped the disaster.

"It was just a big, dark rolling mass," she said. "It looked like it was going in slow motion."

As the time passed, Andrews' tension grew. Two doors down, city officials placed a red tag on the front door of a neighbor's home, declaring it unsafe for occupation.

Then her next door neighbor was advised to leave.

"I'm getting nervous, I'm getting nervous," said Andrews, as she watched neighbors hauling furniture into a moving van.

Times staff writer Bonnie Hayes contributed to this story. Copyright Los Angeles Times