

Tensions Rise After 'Weak' Response to Deadly Nepal Quake

The death toll from the devastating earthquake in Nepal four days ago passed 5,000 on Wednesday as officials conceded they had made mistakes in their initial response, leaving survivors stranded in remote villages waiting for aid and relief.

Over 200 Nepalis protested outside parliament in the capital Kathmandu, demanding the government increase the number of buses going to the interior hills and improve distribution of aid.

"I haven't been able to contact my family members in the village," said Kayant Panday, one of the protesters, who said he woke up at 4 a.m. to get a bus to a badly hit area but was not able to get one. "There is no way I can get information whether they are dead or alive."

The government has yet to fully assess the devastation wrought by Saturday's 7.8 magnitude quake, unable to reach many mountainous areas despite aid supplies and personnel pouring in from around the world.

Anger and frustration were mounting, with many Nepalis sleeping out in the open under makeshift tents for a fourth night since the country's worst quake in more than 80 years.

"This is a disaster on an unprecedented scale. There have been some weaknesses in managing the relief operation," Nepal's Communication Minister Minendra Rijal said late on Tuesday.

"We will improve this from Wednesday."

Prime Minister Sushil Koirala has told Reuters the death toll

could reach 10,000, with information on casualties and damage from far-flung villages and towns yet to come in.

That would surpass the 8,500 who died in a 1934 earthquake, the last disaster on this scale to hit the Himalayan nation of 28 million people located between India and China.

HILLSIDES COLLAPSE

Rescue helicopters have been unable to land in some remote mountainous areas. Shambhu Khatri, a technician on board one of the helicopters, said entire hillsides had collapsed in parts of the worst-hit Gorkha district, burying settlements, and access was almost impossible.

A health official in Laprak, a village in the district best known as the home of Gurkha soldiers, estimated that 1,600 of the 1,700 houses in the village had been razed.

An official from Nepal's home ministry said the number of confirmed deaths had risen to 5,006. Almost 10,000 were injured in Nepal, and more than 80 were also killed in India and Tibet.

In Kathmandu and other cities, hospitals quickly overflowed with injured soon after the quake, with many being treated out in the open or not at all.

Foreign Secretary Shanker Das Bairagi appealed for specialist doctors from overseas, as well as for search-and-rescue teams despite earlier suggestions from officials that Nepal did not need more such assistance.

"Our top priority is for relief and rescue teams. We need neurologists, orthopedic surgeons and trauma surgeons," Bairagi said. Experts from a Polish NGO that has an 87-strong team in Nepal have said the chances of finding people alive in the ruins five days after the quake were "next to zero".

RARE HOPE

Nevertheless, a Nepali-French rescue team pulled a 28-year-old man, Rishi Khanal, from a collapsed apartment block in Kathmandu on Tuesday after he had spent around 80 hours trapped in a room with three dead bodies.

Doctors plan to amputate one of his legs later on Wednesday because it has been damaged by internal bleeding.

"We are trying to make contact with his parents and family members because we are going to perform a serious surgery on him," said one of the doctors, Akhilesh Shrestha.

In one of the first signs that normal life was returning, some street vendors started selling fruit in Kathmandu, but others said they were too scared to open shops because buildings had been so badly damaged.

"I want to start selling, I have children at home, but how can I open a shop where it is risky for me to sit inside?" said Arjun Rai, a 54-year-old who runs a general store.

Tensions between foreigners and Nepalis desperate for relief surfaced, rescuers said, as fresh avalanches were reported in several areas.

Members of Israeli search-and-rescue group Magnus said hundreds of tourists, including about 100 Israelis, were being airlifted out of Langtang in Rasuwa district, a popular trekking area north of Kathmandu hit by a fresh avalanche on Tuesday.

Fights had broken out there because of food shortages, Magnus team member Amit Rubin said. One of the trekkers said there had also been scuffles over places on the rescue helicopters.

In other remote areas where rescue helicopters were unable to land, soldiers had started to make their way overland, first by bus, then by foot.

In Sindhupalchowk, about 3-1/2 hours by road northeast of

Kathmandu, the earthquake was followed by landslides, killing 1,206 people and seriously injuring close to 400.

The quake also triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest that killed at least 18 climbers and guides, including four foreigners, the worst disaster on the world's highest peak.

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