

Taiwan earthquake: Human toll rises, political fall-out begins

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Four days after the Taiwan earthquake there is little hope that any of the 374 people still buried beneath collapsed apartment buildings and homes will be dug out alive. Even recovering bodies may be impossible. International rescue teams from 14 countries are working alongside thousands of Taiwanese soldiers and emergency workers searching for survivors with little success. Most of the buildings that came down were multi-storey and people are buried beneath tons of rubble. The number of confirmed dead has reached 2,138 with more than 8,100 injured.

The earthquake, measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, is the most severe in the country this century. It has been followed by hundreds of aftershocks, ranging from low intensity to major earthquakes. On Wednesday morning a quake measuring 6.8 shook the same central Taiwan region devastated the day before. It marks the end of a 30-year period of relative inactivity in the continental plates that are also responsible for the major quakes that strike Japan. Scientists from Taiwan's Central Weather Bureau have been warning of the likelihood of major earthquakes since March.

Central Taiwan is a disaster area. In the town of Puli, 98 percent of buildings are damaged, at Chungliiao, 80 percent, and in the town of Tungshih, with a population over 70,000, one third of buildings suffered serious damage. The number of people made homeless is well over 100,000. An estimated 5,500 people are stranded in remote hamlets and mountain resorts, which have not been reached by relief workers.

Refugee camps have been set up around towns and thousands more people are living on the sides of roads. The worst affected counties have no electricity, running water, sewerage or communications. Most roads and all rail links have been destroyed. There is no power to operate the freezers at morgues. In Chungliiao, a refugee

shelter was established within metres of dozens of decomposing bodies, heightening both the trauma and the risk of disease.

Despite the initial praise of Taiwan's preparedness and the strength of its building codes, evidence is mounting that the majority of deaths were due to cost-saving compromises made during construction.

* In the worst-affected counties of Nantou and Taichung, most buildings were only constructed to withstand earthquakes of a 6 magnitude on the Richter scale.

* In the city of Douliu, five collapsed apartment buildings were all constructed by the same contracting firm. The walls of the buildings were filled with plastic bottles and buckets instead of bricks.

* The Construction and Planning Administration has accused contractors in Taipei, Taiwan's capital, of using poor quality cement in order to maximise profits. An investigation has begun into the contractor who built the 12-storey building that collapsed in the capital, where the vast majority of buildings suffered only minor damage.

The response of Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang party to the earthquake is an indication that widespread outrage exists toward authorities. The central government immediately released \$US94 million for emergency relief and instructed the central bank to make \$3.1 billion available in low-interest loans to earthquake victims. The ruling party itself donated \$6.3 million to relief efforts. Its presidential candidate, current vice-president Lien Chan, said he was suspending his election campaign and would donate his entire election fund of more than \$6 million to relief agencies.

A number of business figures with ties to the Kuomintang have also announced large personal or corporate donations. Such is the fear of a voter backlash

that the Kuomintang representative for Tungshih, one of the worst-affected areas, publicly called for a delay in next year's election for at least two years.

The government announced an investigation force of 1,000 architects and engineers to conduct a nationwide inquiry into whether poor construction contributed to building collapses. It was forced to concede, however, that even if construction companies were found guilty of criminal offences the highest penalty they could receive was a five-year jail term.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, Chinese president Jiang Zemin released a statement of sorrow and sympathy, declaring that “the catastrophe and agony of our Taiwan compatriots influences the hearts of all Chinese”. He extended an offer of medical teams and financial assistance. His comments were hailed in the Hong Kong *South China Morning Post* as a sign there may be a lessening in the current China-Taiwan tensions, which have in recent weeks seen the Chinese military conduct a dress rehearsal for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan.

The opposite may prove to be the case. Jiang's statements were framed within the “One China” policy—the internationally recognised stand that Taiwan is an indivisible part of China—which was effectively repudiated by Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui in July. Earthquake assistance for Taiwan facilitated through the mainland has now become entangled in political controversy.

On Wednesday, China refused permission for a Russian military rescue team to fly over Chinese airspace on its way to Taiwan, on the grounds it preferred non-government agencies such as the Red Cross, to assist its province of Taiwan. Yesterday, Taiwan's Foreign Minister Jason Hu publicly denounced Beijing for behaving “counter to international humanitarian principles” and its offer of assistance as having “political motivation”.

The political point-scoring has also extended to Washington. A leader of the House International Relations Committee, Democrat Sherrod Brown, issued an official press release condemning the United Nations for asking Beijing's permission before it sent a rescue team to Taiwan. He is part of a lobby calling for the US to take a far more aggressive stance against Beijing.

The UN was acting on the existing protocols of international diplomacy under which Taiwan is

considered a part of mainland China. In 1979, the United States and allied countries formally adopted a pro-Beijing One China policy and supported the exclusion of the Republic of China, Taiwan's official name, from the United Nations.

Brown declared, however, that the “bureaucrats at the UN are worried about offending Beijing's dictators ... China has absolutely no right to interfere in this situation. Regardless of Beijing's so-called One China policy, the fact is that Taiwan has never been a part of the Peoples Republic of China. It's time for the world to drop the charade and face reality—Taiwan is not part of China.”



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