

India's most powerful earthquake in 50 years claims at least 2,000 lives

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By official estimates, at least 2,000 people are dead after India's most powerful earthquake in 50 years hit the western state of Gujarat on Friday morning. The toll is expected to rise further as rescuers search for thousands of people trapped in the rubble of fallen buildings. More than 3,000 people have been injured and many others left homeless.

According to a report in the *Times of India*, the number of dead has already reached 4,000—with 3,000 victims in the desert town of Bhuj near the border with Pakistan. An estimated 90 percent of the town's buildings have been damaged and the local army hospital is overflowing with injured. With a population of 150,000, Bhuj was just 20km from the quake's epicentre.

Gujarat's commercial capital, Ahmedabad, a city of five million, was also badly hit. At least 150 buildings across the city collapsed, including a dozen multi-storey constructions, killing more than 400 people. The Press Trust of India said 70 people had died at the N.S. Hospital waiting for treatment. Corpses were piled on the institution's verandah.

Rescue efforts have been hampered by a lack of heavy cranes and other equipment. People are digging through the rubble with their bare hands. Ahmedabad fire chief Rajesh Bhat said the fire station had been besieged by distraught people asking for help to dig out their relatives. “This is an emergency. We are facing a riotous crowd. A fear psychosis is developing in the city,” he said.

Associated Press described the situation in Ahmedabad: “[H]elmeted rescue workers used iron rods to pry slabs of concrete and metal, searching for survivors. Women wept and rocked back and forth, watching as the few available bulldozers and cranes pushed through the piles of stone that once had housed

families and shops. Beds, children's toys and clothes lay abandoned in the debris, lamp posts and electric pylons were twisted and many buildings were left leaning precariously.”

While Gujarat's two nuclear power plants were reportedly undamaged, gas, power, phone and water services were disrupted across the state. The entire city of Ahmedabad suffered a power failure for several hours on Friday and the phones were dead throughout much of the day. Last night people, either homeless or fearing aftershocks, were huddled around campfires.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee urged relief workers to go on “a war-footing” to cope with the disaster but relief supplies have been limited. The government has announced it will fly in 10,000 tents, 10,000 tonnes of grain and a team of 20 doctors and surgeons.

The Indian Meteorological Department initially measured the intensity of the quake at 6.9 on the Richter scale but this estimate was later revised upward to 7.9 as reports came in from international observatories. Bhuj was hit by four or five aftershocks measuring up to 5.

The quake is the most powerful to strike India since August 1950 when an 8.5 magnitude tremor hit Assam in the north-east killing 1,538 people. Yesterday's quake was felt in neighbouring Pakistan, where at least 10 people died in the southern province of Sindh, and Nepal as well as in the Indian cities of Delhi, Bombay and Madras. The quake may have triggered an aftershock felt in the Bangladeshi town of Satkhira near the Indian border.

Following the disaster, R.R. Kelkar, director-general of the Indian Meteorological Department, was quick to emphasise the difficulties of earthquake forecasting. “Earthquakes cannot be predicted by anyone,

anywhere, in any country,” he said. “This is the scientific truth.”

While it is not possible, at present, to determine with any degree of accuracy the time and place of major tremors, seismologists are able to identify zones of high danger that lie along the intersection of the continental tectonic plates.

The area at the centre of the latest quake—the Rann of Kutch—is among the zones of highest risk in the world, along with the Himalayan belt and India's northeast. The district lies on the Narmada-Sohn lineament, a fault that caused a major earthquake in Jabalpur a few years ago. The coastal town of Bhavnagar has experienced repeated tremors in recent months, suggesting that a major quake was imminent.

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The science of earthquake prediction may not be exact but the technology to construct buildings capable of withstanding major tremors is well established. Little has been done by the present or previous Indian governments to set and enforce the necessary construction standards in high-risk areas.

Reports from yesterday's earthquake are still scanty, but they indicate that shoddy construction caused many deaths. Civil engineer Ashvin Upadhyay told Agence France Presse: “We went around the whole city [Ahmedabad] for professional interest. Nearly all the buildings that have fallen down are multi-storey ones constructed about five years ago. They are all without proper foundations and poorly constructed. Buildings which are older have proved more solid. It is sad that people have bought new flats with large sums of money. They seem to have been cruelly cheated.”

An article in the *Hindustan Times* noted: “Ten-storeyed Manishi Towers, home to many of the city's well-heeled, resembled a giant birthday cake that had been cut in half. One entire wing of 20 flats had collapsed, taking down with it all its occupants. It was obvious that there were many people under the debris. Parts of the staircases still clung to the still-standing part of the structure. Air conditioners, electrical wires and the like hung precariously.”

As is the case with most major quakes, it is almost certain that the city's poor are well represented among the victims of flimsy housing that has collapsed.

The potential for further disasters is highlighted by

public interest litigation that has been before the Delhi High Court for the last two years. The petitioner, Dr B.L. Wadhwa, is calling for authorities to institute measures to protect the Indian capital against the impact of a major earthquake. Citing experts, he has warned that a tremor of intensity 7 or 8 could hit Delhi at any time with catastrophic consequences for the city of five million. He has suggested that all buildings, especially the high-rise ones, be made quake-proof.

The High Court has directed the national government, the Delhi government, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and the New Delhi Municipal Council to immediately attend to the points contained in the petition. According to the Indian government, standards have been laid down and meetings held but Dr Wadhwa alleges that nothing has actually been done.



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