

7,200 confirmed dead, 500,000 homeless

## Western powers provide a pittance Indian earthquake victims

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The international response to the earthquake that struck the western Indian state of Gujarat on January 26, causing widespread devastation and loss of life, has once again highlighted the callous indifference of Western governments to the plight of disaster victims, particularly in so-called developing countries.

The latest government figures put the number of confirmed dead at 7,181. Another 29,000 people have been injured, many of them seriously. According to Gujarat's Home Minister Haren Pandya, many bodies are still buried beneath the rubble and the number of dead could be as many as 25,000. Other estimates are even higher—Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes has warned that the death toll may reach 100,000.

The number of dead is just the sharpest indicator of the extent of the tragedy. Some 73,142 homes were damaged in the quake, and more than 500,000 people have been left homeless, most of them living in the open or in makeshift shelters. Bhachau, for instance, once a town of 26,000 people, has barely a building standing and most of the survivors have left.

In many areas people are without the basic requirements of water, food, light, heating and clothing. Medical supplies, including essential drugs as well as anesthetics, remain scarce. In the weeks ahead diseases such as typhoid and cholera caused by contaminated water could claim even more victims. Relief workers say there is a high danger of epidemics because many bodies and rotting animal carcasses have not yet been disposed of.

Even though the situation calls out for an immediate massive infusion of funds and assistance, the aid provided by the major nations can only be described as contemptuous. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher announced that the US would increase “emergency humanitarian assistance” from an initial

\$US1 million to just \$5 million—comprising two airlifts of food and other basic supplies, a ten-member relief team and other aid. By way of comparison, the sum is one-eighth of the \$40 million lavished on the presidential inaugural celebrations for George W. Bush.

The response was no different elsewhere. The European Union provided \$2.78 million in emergency assistance. On top of that Britain has pledged \$4 million, Germany \$475,000, Italy \$2.1 million, Canada \$662,000, Norway \$1.1 million, Sweden \$523,000. Japan has given \$900,000 to date and Australia \$1.5 million. If one tallies all these figures from the world's wealthiest nations, the total is less than \$20 million—as compared, for example, to the \$30 million spent on the four-hour opening ceremony for the Sydney Olympic Games last year.

The limited character of the assistance has undoubtedly compounded the tragedy. Under conditions in which hours can mean the difference between life and death, rescue operations in the devastated towns and villages of Gujarat have been hampered by the lack of cranes, heavy earthmoving and cutting equipment needed to remove rubble and debris. Rescuers are reported to have used iron bars and even their bare hands to scour the wreckage in the first days of the crisis.

As of January 30, only 8,660 tents from various countries and Indian states had arrived in the stricken region and just 2,450 were expected within the next days. Yet, Gujarat Home Minister Pandya said at least 25,000 to 30,000 tents were required immediately. Only 92,000 blankets have arrived for the half million people reckoned to be homeless.

While the Indian government claims it has temporarily overcome the shortage of doctors, medical supplies in many areas remain critically low. A full four days after the earthquake hit, the government was still making

urgent international appeals for the provision of a range of desperately needed antiseptics, antibiotics, anti-bacterial and pain-relieving drugs as well as bandages, dressings and anesthetics. Calls are still being made for the supply of self-contained medical teams, including paramedics, X-ray vans and field hospitals.

Many of the doctors and others involved in the rescue effort are volunteers, highlighting the markedly different response of ordinary people in India and internationally to the plight of their fellow human beings. An article in the British *Guardian* newspaper noted the efforts of 250 volunteers who had gathered at a Hindu temple in north London to prepare shipments of donated clothes and blankets to Gujarat. A number of them were planning to fly to the area themselves to assess the damage.

In the absence of government assistance, non-government aid agencies are forced to try to fill the gap. In some cases, their donations are more substantial than those of governments. The American Red Cross, for example is contributing \$525,000, about 10 percent of the figure being given by the US government and all its agencies, and larger than that given by Germany.

Even so, the aid agencies have neither the financial means, the capacity nor the organisation to meet the demands of a disaster of such proportions. Moreover the involvement of a range of individuals and groups inevitably poses a nightmare for those seeking to coordinate rescue and relief operations. Areas of greatest need have to be identified, relief supplies distributed, volunteers housed and fed.

Several key medical agencies, including Doctors without Borders, Medical Teams International and Americares, still plan to “airlift supplies and other medical personnel in the coming days”. Others have said they are waiting for reports from their Indian representatives to determine how best to proceed.

International Federation of the Red Cross spokesman, Patrick Fuller, commented: “It takes a long time to clear stuff through the airport, as there is no lifting equipment and we don't have enough volunteers to simply shift everything by hand”. According to a January 30 UN Disaster Management Team report, the non-availability of transport means that “urgently needed relief materials are being dumped”.

In the longer term, it is estimated that between \$3.5 and \$5.5 billion will be needed for reconstruction. The Indian government has asked the World Bank and the Asian Development Fund for loans totalling \$1.5 billion for rebuilding and immediate relief.

A World Bank spokesman announced it would make available \$300 million immediately and would take a month to process India's application after an expert team made an “on-the-spot” assessment. Within six months, the World Bank and the Gujarat state government will put together a long-term emergency relief package.

But there is no guarantee that India will get the full amount. When a cyclone struck the eastern Indian state of Orissa a year ago causing widespread damage and killing 10,000 people, India applied for a \$300 million World Bank loan and received only \$150 million following an “on-the-spot” report.

The lack of response and almost total disregard for human suffering shown by Western governments is not accidental. It reflects the outlook of the multi-billion dollar corporations and the wealthy elite, whose overriding concern is always profit.

It is not the resources that are lacking. The ad hoc and inadequate rescue efforts for the latest disaster victims stand in sharp contrast to what can be done when the economic and strategic interests of the major powers are at stake. Ironically it has been under the guise of “humanitarian concern” that aggressive and very costly military interventions have been carried out over the last year in the Balkans and East Timor.

The US and other countries have built up specialised rapid reaction military forces that can be transported to virtually any spot in the world within 24 hours. These forces involve thousands of troops and tonnes of heavy equipment along with food, accommodation, water supplies, transport, medical facilities and sophisticated communication and co-ordination systems. In the case of the Gulf War, the US military flew in fully-equipped, inflatable, air-conditioned hospital units, complete with modern operating theatres.

If similar amounts of money, organisation and expertise were made available for disaster relief there is little doubt that the horrifying death toll and human misery that now accompanies tragedies such as Gujarat would be drastically reduced.



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