

Second disaster looming for millions of Kashmir earthquake victims

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Two months after the October 8 earthquake that devastated Kashmir and the northern areas of Pakistan, the number killed continues to rise. Pakistani officials put the death toll at more than 87,000, but independent estimates suggest the figure could be well over 100,000. In Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir, another 1,350 people were killed by the quake.

As the Himalayan winter sets in, a new disaster is looming for the 3.5 million left homeless. Without adequate shelter and supplies of food and clothes, many more people could die of exposure, hunger and related diseases, particularly in remote mountain villages. The Pakistani military has not been able to reach some sections of the devastated area. Parts of the steep Neelum Valley, where the one road has been destroyed by rockslides, are still not accessible.

Stig Traavik, director of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told the *Dawn* newspaper on November 24 that the situation in mountainous regions was “quite alarming and can turn into a nightmare” if adequate relief were not provided before the snows started.

Now the snowfall has begun, in some areas eight inches deep. Pakistani meteorologists predict that the 2006 winter will be bitter, with sub-zero temperatures and up to five metres of snow. Cold winds, which are on the way, will increase the impact. Heavy rain over the past few weeks has contributed to the miserable conditions facing refugees and has led to further landslides.

Tanvir Naqvi from Pieer Chanasi village told Reuters: “We’re in trouble. Our children and animals are also in trouble. The temperature is dropping and a tent is not enough.” Bidal Nool, 88, complained: “Nobody is taking care of me except Allah.” A young survivor Jamil, who waited a month for a tent, added: “Life is very difficult. Our food will not last long.”

Haroonur Rasheed, a survivor in a mountain village, told the newsagency that the seven members of his family were without proper shelter. “We know tents are a rare commodity but if we don’t get one we’re sure to die of the cold”. Mohammad Sain said: “We’re living in a shed we have made from straw but that’s not going to work in the rain and snow.”

Already the number of people suffering the effects of cold is on the increase. According to Bashir Rahman, the chief executive at the main hospital in Muzaffarabad, the number of people being treated each day in the city’s facilities for pneumonia and acute respiratory infections had risen sharply to 1,000.

“It’s most unusual to have these kinds of diseases in this season but we estimated the number has tripled because of the lack of proper shelter,” Rahman said. “People are living in tents, and they do not have proper facilities to shield themselves from the cold.”

Dr Abdul Hameed of the Pakistan Paediatric Association warned of the danger of epidemics, including pneumonia, encephalitis, chest infection, diphtheria, meningitis, water and airborne infections among children. As well as the cold, he pointed to the unhygienic conditions in the city’s refugee camps that could lead to tetanus, dysentery and diarrhea.

UN spokesman Ben Major reported last week the first deaths thought to be from pneumonia—a young girl and a three-month-old boy. The UN discounted media reports that eight people had died of cold. There is no doubt, however, that the situation is extremely grave.

NATO officer Lieutenant Colonel Mario Lemos Pires commented on November 24 that the extent of the catastrophe was “unimaginable”. Between 2.8 million and 3.2 million people “without shelter may survive with some difficulty” if the level of aid kept up. With 3.5 million homeless, conservative estimates put the

number of potential deaths at 300,000 to 700,000 people. According to Pires, the figure includes at least half of the 70,000 who are presently seriously injured.

In Islamabad, Darren Boisvert, spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration, explained last Friday that of the 420,000 tents distributed to refugees, “90 percent were not winterised”. “Winterised tents are expensive, hard to procure and must be shipped from overseas,” he said. Only 5,000 such tents have been distributed so far, to people above the snow line, and another 5,000 are due to be handed out by December 12.

Jan Vandemoortele, UN aid coordinator in Pakistan, acknowledged that “a colossal job” remained. As the winter set in, he expected many more people from mountain villages to flood into overcrowded refugee camps around Muzaffarabad. “We remain on a knife edge. It may get worse before it gets better,” he said.

It is an indictment not only of the Pakistani government but of the major powers that two months after the earthquake, millions of survivors lack the means to ensure their survival through the bitter winter months. The victims will inevitably be villagers or the urban poor who even prior to the disaster had difficulty eking out a living for their families.

The danger posed by the Himalayan winter was warned about from the outset. The difficulties posed by the mountainous terrain and blocked roads were also known. Yet, as in the case of the Asian tsunami, there has been a huge gulf between the obvious needs of the survivors and the international aid supplied.

The UN has received less than half of its \$US550 million appeal for immediate relief. UN emergency operations chief in Pakistan, Andrew MacLeod was forced to make another plea on November 29: “We need ongoing and additional support in the next few days so we could reach as many of the remaining vulnerable people as possible”.

Lack of helicopters and other air transport has also hampered the delivery of assistance to inaccessible mountain villages. While the US military and its allies have the capacity to transport large armies around the world to Iraq and Afghanistan, the same urgency does not apply to the victims of the Kashmir earthquake. The US has provided only a handful of helicopters and other aircraft to assist in relief efforts. According to NATO sources, the 1,000 soldiers of the NATO Reaction

Force (NRF) had completed just 135 helicopter missions by November 24.

At an aid conference on November 19, international donors pledged some \$US5.4 billion for reconstruction, but most of the money is not available for immediate needs. Nor, if it is finally forthcoming at all, will the aid be sufficient to rebuild the shattered lives of the millions of people affected by the earthquake. The promised financial assistance is a pittance compared to the Pentagon’s budget for maintaining the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Like the Asian tsunami that engulfed the region on December 26, the Kashmir earthquake has once again demonstrated the indifference and contempt with which the imperialist powers regard the impoverished masses of the world.



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