

Kashmir earthquake survivors abandoned to freezing winter

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Three months after the October 8 Kashmir earthquake, many thousands of survivors are living in tents and face the danger of freezing to death as the Himalayan winter worsens. Severe cold waves have been reported from the quake-affected areas, with nighttime temperatures falling well below zero degrees Celsius, and heavy snows have fallen. Minus-2 degrees has been recorded in Muzaffarabad, the capital of the worst hit Pakistani province of Kashmir and minus-13 degrees in mountain villages where many earthquake victims are living.

Aid agencies have been warning for months of a looming winter disaster whose death toll could easily exceed that of the initial catastrophe. At least five million people in Pakistan and India were affected by the 9.0 magnitude quake. More than 87,000 people have died, and about three million are still homeless, many living in temporary tent camps or in mountain villages, increasingly cut off from relief supplies.

CARE International warned again on January 5: “[T]he harsh Himalayan winter is expected to be even worse than usual this year, creating fears of another wave of deaths from hypothermia, pneumonia and other respiratory infections—particularly among children—among those with no or inadequate shelter and poor sanitary conditions.”

It added that there are not enough winterised tents to go around, so survivors had begun moving south in search of warmer weather. “Those most at risk from the extreme cold are the estimated 1.5 million people who haven’t found shelter... For many of them, the prospects of finding properly winterised shelter are running out.”

Another aid agency, ADEPT, reported on January 9: “Three million shelterless are spending nights in the open. Many villages continue to remain inaccessible... Cut-off villages need urgent help and medical aid and thousands could die of hypothermia, injuries, and disease over the next few weeks as the harsh Himalayan winter looms.

“There are reports that 15,000 tents have been supplied. But these are such that they cannot keep out the harsh cold of the Himalayan winter. Winter has not yet begun but night

temperatures drop as low as minus five degrees centigrade. What are required are arctic or winterised tents that can keep out the cold, withstand the howling winds and do not crumble under the six to eight feet of snowfall, and allow a fire to be lighted inside (kerosene stoves or heaters would create another logistical problem of supply of fuel).”

SOS-Kinderdorf International reported on January 10: “Massive landslides resulting from heavy snowfall and rain often block the main road from Islamabad to quake-hit Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Relief aid often cannot be airlifted into the region because of fog. Due to the cold temperatures, many children in the region are suffering from pneumonia and bronchitis, while many cases of gastroenteritis are reported at the various emergency relief camps.”

According to Camp Management Cluster, an estimated 137,008 people are living in 26 planned and 113 spontaneous camps across the affected region. ActionAid reported on January 11 that the snow has been so heavy that about 20 percent of tents have collapsed in some areas.

Early last week, dozens of tents collapsed at Mira Tanolian, a village about 6 km from Muzaffarabad. The families also complained about the lack of warm clothing. “Look at me. I’m wearing just one sweater and this one shawl. It’s not enough to cover myself. The children are falling sick. We were told we would get additional blankets but they still haven’t come,” Nasima Bibi, 45, a mother of five, told reporters. Residents said that although they had received ample rice, grain and lentils, they needed warmer clothes as well as tarpaulins to insulate and waterproof their tents.

Aid agencies have complained about the shortage of corrugated iron sheets for building, which is forcing many people to live in the snow in summer tents. People living outside the camps, who have refused to leave higher mountainous areas, face even more severe conditions. They often have no protection against the freezing winter.

Oxfam Australia emergency manager Richard Young said those who had chosen to remain in their villages might not

survive the winter. “So it is going to be very tough, but I have to respect the views of the people themselves. ... They’ve made a conscious decision to stay up in their homes for very understandable reasons.”

Another aid worker pointed to these “understandable reasons”. Ingvar Anda from Caritas Australia, which is carrying out relief work in the Boi and Diola regions, said on January 10: “Some of the displaced people have chosen to camp next to their destroyed houses because their fields are important for their livelihoods... It is the preferred option of the affected people in this region that they to stay close to their houses and land or their families, rather than going to larger camps, due to security fears and poor living conditions within the camps.”

These people are so dependent on their crops and/or cattle that they cannot leave them. The authorities—both the Pakistani military regime of General Pervez Musharraf and the regional Kashmiri government—have failed to provide any alternative livelihood or adequate financial support for them.

Agencies have also reported that snowfalls and icy rains have flooded latrines, adding to the health hazards caused by poor sanitation and waste management facilities in the relief camps.

According to a joint statement issued on January 5 by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WFN), and CARE International, clean water and sanitation are not available in many areas. They said the absence of hygienic solid waste management “should be accorded the highest priority”.

Quoting a report on the Pakistani health system, the *Dawn* newspaper reported on January 10 that Musharraf’s government also lacked a program to control leishmaniasis, a parasitic skin disease. “The risk of spread is currently high due to ideal breeding conditions,” it said.

Widespread effects of trauma have been reported among quake survivors. Khalid Saeed, a mental health coordinator with the World Health Organisation, estimated up to 180,000 victims had serious mental disorders, including severe depression, psychosis and anxiety. Half a million faced moderate mental problems, such as stress and flashbacks. Up to two million people needed “psychological first aid,” which included help in finding their way to relief workers and tracking down family members.

Saeed warned: “Without treatment their problems will worsen... They won’t be able to resume their lives and take part in reconstruction. It will not only affect them but also their family and the community.”

International organisations have highlighted the environmental hazards that are threatening survivors’ health. In their January 5 statement, the IUCN, WFN and CARE

said displaced survivors were putting pressure on fragile forests, and warned that heavy winter precipitation could bring down more landslides.

The conditions faced by the quake survivors are an indictment of the Musharraf regime and the world powers. All of them knew from the outset about the coming Himalayan winter and that no adequate measures had been taken to protect the survivors from the freezing conditions. Tens of thousands of victims have been simply abandoned to their fate.

Not only is the relief operation woefully inadequate but there is no sign of any serious reconstruction work. Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Azize told correspondents in Islamabad on January 10: “We have a long way to go to complete the reconstruction and rehabilitation work.”

Even the meagre “pledges” made by the major powers for relief and reconstruction works have not materialised. According to a UN press release on December 30, just \$US226 million has been committed of the \$550 million UN Flash Appeal for humanitarian assistance.

Last week, the UN Humanitarian Air Cargo and Passenger Services (UNHAS), which maintains air cargo operations to transport relief materials, stated that it had received only 54 percent of its \$100 million appeal. It warned that if additional funding did not arrive, the current operation might have to stop in the second half of March.

The air operations are vital for hundreds of thousand of survivors scattered in remote and high-altitude areas, which are difficult to reach because roads have been blocked and access cut by landslides. The US has contributed only \$8.5 million to the UNHAS appeal. According to the UNHAS, Washington provided only 29 helicopters, and of these, just 4 S-70s and 12 Chinooks remained in operation.



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