

Massive earthquake in China kills at least 10,000

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At least 10,000 people were killed when an earthquake of 7.8 magnitude on the Richter scale hit the south-western Chinese province of Sichuan at 2:28 p.m. on Monday. The death toll is climbing continuously as bodies are pulled from the rubble of buildings and rescue workers arrive at new scenes of devastation.

Tremors rocked other parts of China including in Beijing and Shanghai that are thousands of kilometres from Sichuan. At least 300 deaths have been reported in three neighbouring provinces. Even residents in Thailand and Vietnam were forced to evacuate as buildings shook.

The impact of the quake was particularly devastating because it was relatively close to the earth's surface—just 10 kilometres deep. The last major earthquake in China was in 1976 when the entire city of Tangshan was levelled and 270,000 people died.

Dale Rutstein from the UNICEF China organisation told the *Scotsman*: “I would expect the death toll to rise, as Sichuan is one of the most populated provinces and one of the poorest. There are a lot of people living in marginal areas that are difficult to get to, and a lot of buildings in those areas are substandard and could collapse very quickly.”

The present death toll includes just 15 deaths in Wenchuan county, right near the epicentre of the earthquake. Its 110,000 residents have had minimal contact with the outside world as of early this morning. In Beichuan county, which is also near the epicentre, 80 percent of buildings have reportedly collapsed, killing more than 7,000 people out of a population of 161,000.

According to the Xinhua newsagency, the Wenchuan Communist Party secretary, Wang Bin, wept during a satellite phone call as he explained that most peasant homes in two rural townships had collapsed. Most houses have been damaged and 30,000 people in

Wenchuan are living in the open. Roads and rail links as well as electricity and water supplies have been severed in the county. “We are in urgent need of tents, food, medicine and satellite communications equipment through air drop,” Wang declared.

Wenchuan is home to a large population of Qiang and Tibetan minorities. Although just 88 kilometres from the Sichuan provincial capital of Chengdu, parts of the county have been closed to foreign journalists since the eruption of anti-government protests in Tibet in March.

In the Juyuan township of Dujiangyan city, just south of the epicentre, a three-storey school building collapsed burying 900 students. As elsewhere in China, the middle school was very crowded with 18 classes and 50 students in each class. The number of survivors is still not clear.

The London-based *Times* described the rescue scene: “Photographs posted on the Internet showed arms and torso sticking out of the rubble of the school as dozens of people scrabbled to free them. They used small winches or their bare hands to move concrete slabs. Rescuers had pulled 50 bodies from the debris. Two girls said that they escaped because they had run faster than others.”

A hospital in Juyuan also collapsed, burying hundreds of people. Another 420 students were trapped in school in Dujiangyan, and workers have rescued less than 100. More than 80 percent of buildings in the city have been damaged or destroyed completely.

Chinese authorities have dispatched 50,000 troops and armed police to the area, both to carry out rescue operations and, as with other major disasters, to insure against any eruption of popular anger. Heavy rains, damaged roads and landslides have been hampering rescue efforts.

All electricity and communication within a radius of

80 kilometres from the epicentre appears to be down. According China Mobile, the quake knocked out more than 2,300 of its cell-phone towers. Fixed phone lines have been severely disrupted throughout Sichuan.

The provincial capital of Chengdu has a population of 12 million people. Although no significant damage has been reported in the city, at least 45 people died and 600 were injured. Many residents slept outside for fear of further aftershocks. In a text message to the Associated Press, an Israeli student Ronen Medzini described the chaos: “Traffic jams, no running water, power cuts, everyone sitting in the streets, patients evacuated from hospitals sitting outside and waiting.”

In another major city of Chongqing, four students were killed and more than 100 injured when two primary schools were damaged. To the northwest of the epicentre, two chemical plants in Shifang city collapsed, burying hundreds of people and causing more than 80 tonnes of corrosive ammonia to leak out. Some 6,000 people had to be evacuated. The latest reports indicate that thousands of workers were trapped after a steam turbine factory collapsed in Hanwang.

The Chinese government has intervened rapidly to prevent the disaster become another source of popular discontent and international criticism. Premier Wen Jiabao rushed to the scene almost immediately after the earthquake and the state media has provided extensive reporting.

Outside the Juyuan Middle School, Wen bowed three times to show respect as bodies were pulled out from the rubble and urged rescue workers to make the utmost effort to save the children. “Not one minute can be wasted. One minute, one second could mean a child’s life,” he said. Making a national appeal, he declared: “In a socialist country under the great leadership of our government, the people will unite and overcome all disasters.”

Beijing is already facing international protests over its suppression of demonstrators in Tibet. It is also under pressure, particularly from the US, to press the Burmese junta to accept international aid for victims of the recent cyclone. Especially in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government is determined to show that it can handle any major disaster.

At home, the catastrophe has the potential to become another source of unrest. Earlier this year, severe

snowstorms disrupted power and transport and stranded millions of passengers leading to widespread anger over the government inept handling of the crisis.

Far from being “socialist”, the Chinese Communist Party has transformed the country over the past three decades into a gigantic sweatshop for foreign capital. The operation of the free market has led to a deepening gulf between rich and poor, fuelling discontent and anger towards the government, which is notorious for its corruption and callous indifference to the plight of the majority of the population.

The lack of government control over many economic sectors has significantly weakened its ability to coordinate disaster relief. Furthermore, while infrastructure for foreign investors is world class, transport, communications and other services in more backward provinces such as Sichuan is poor.

Sichuan is located at the fringes of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau—a zone particularly prone to earthquakes. It is already clear from the extensive damage, particularly in rural areas, that most buildings were not constructed to withstand tremors. A design code to take earthquakes into account was only instituted after the Tangshan disaster in 1976, and many buildings in Sichuan simply did not meet even its minimal requirements. Building codes are openly flouted by developers determined to maximise profits.

The governments in the US, Europe and Japan have been quick to send pro forma condolences and offers of aid to China. But there was no doubt a collective sign of relief in financial markets around the world that the catastrophe hit relatively isolated areas of China far from the economic powerhouses of the eastern seaboard where hundreds of billions of dollars of investment are at stake.



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