

China quake rescue operations face rising toll, strained public services

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The official casualty toll from the massive May 12 earthquake in China's Sichuan province continues to rise, amid growing public anger and signs that rescue efforts are swamping the region's underdeveloped public infrastructure.

According to state wire service Xinhua, the official death toll rose to 22,069 yesterday, with 21,577 in Sichuan and the remainder in nearby provinces or autonomous zones: 364 in Gansu, 109 in Shaanxi, 15 in Chongqing, 2 in Henan, 1 in Yunnan, and 1 in Hubei. A rescue headquarters directed by the State Council and headed by Premier Wen Jiabao estimated yesterday that the death toll would probably exceed 50,000.

There were 168,669 wounded, including 159,006 in Sichuan. Xinhua also reported that at least 14,000 people remained buried under collapsed buildings and debris as of yesterday. For any who have survived trapped under the rubble without food or water, time is fast running out.

Rescue efforts are often proceeding with hand tools for lack of heavy machinery, which in any case cannot reach many of the worst-hit areas due to narrow mountain roads being blocked by landslides. Paratroopers are being dropped into some of these accessible regions.

Sichuan province Vice-Governor Li Chengyun also told a news conference that 4,807,200 people had been made homeless in the province—6 percent of Sichuan's population. The Ministry of Civil Affairs told Xinhua that 181,470 tents, 170,000 cotton-padded clothes, and 220,000 quilts had been allocated to the disaster area.

Smaller earthquakes continue to shake the area. A tremor in Sichuan's Lixian County registered 5.9 on the Richter scale yesterday, caused further landslides, building collapses, and road blockages, and reduced telecommunications by knocking out more cell phone

transmission towers.

There are also flooding concerns over the rivers flowing eastward from the mountains of western Sichuan, towards the Sichuan Basin in the central and eastern parts of the province. According to state officials, the quake damaged at least 391 dams and some are in danger of bursting.

The Water Resources Ministry said that the major Zipingpu Dam was in a more stable condition than on May 14, when soldiers were rushed to bolster the dam amid reports that it was developing cracks 10cm wide and that it risked flooding Dujiangyan, a city of 630,000 people. The dam was built from 2000 to 2006, over the objections of seismologists concerned about Zipingpu's proximity to major geological faults. Its hydropower generating plant—an important reason behind the Chinese Communist's Party's support for the dam project—has reportedly fallen into the dam's reservoir.

Landslides also have blocked the flow of two rivers in Qingchuan county, causing a huge lake to form. Local officials are warning that the build-up of water could eventually burst through the landslides, causing a flood. Li Hao, the county's Communist Party chief, told Xinhua: "The rising water could cause the mountains to collapse. We desperately need geological experts to carry out tests and fix a rescue plan."

Accounts of rescue efforts underscore the region's poverty and the fragility of its underfunded infrastructure.

The Chinese government has been forced to make public appeals for private donations of all types of rescue equipment—from hammers and shovels to rubber boats, demolition tools, and cranes.

Medical care is in large part being dispensed in tents, because many hospitals in the region have been badly

damaged or have completely collapsed. Medical equipment is scarce, with Red Cross Society of China doctor Wu Tianfu telling the press: “What do we need? We just need some rest. Then we need gloves, masks, iodine, sutures, cold medicine. It’s a long list.”

The problems are compounded by the serious nature of the injuries, and the delay in extracting many of the victims from collapsed buildings. Nurse Zhao Xiaoli said: “I’m numb. The first day, hundreds of kids died when a school collapsed. The rest who came in had serious injuries. There was so little we could do for them.”

Disinfectants are reportedly in very short supply, and authorities are concerned about the possibility of epidemics. This is compounded by the large number of corpses, which are currently being buried wrapped in plastic, in the hopes of stopping the spread of disease. Deputy Health Minister Gao Qing told reporters, “We will try to achieve the goal of no big epidemic after a great disaster,” quickly adding, “However, whether we achieve the goal ... will depend on the real work we do in those areas.”

In a separate interview on May 15, Gao confessed: “The public health care system in China is insufficient. How we are going to solve the medical expense this time will be an issue. The government should be responsible for providing medical treatment to [earthquake victims].”

The lack of health-care coverage stems directly from the Chinese Communist Party’s pro-capitalist policy. Rural health-care facilities collapsed in the wake of the 1979 reforms, led by Deng Xiaoping, opening China to global investment. The initial reforms moved towards creating a free market in land by dissolving village communes, which had amongst other duties organized rural health care. In 1984, only 40 to 45 percent of the population was covered by a cooperative medical system, as opposed to over 80 percent in 1979.

While the situation has improved somewhat since, with the opening of fee-based hospitals, large masses of rural people are still not covered. The British *Economist*—which vigorously supported the free-market reforms—noted in December 2007: “The biggest beneficiaries are the richest peasants. The poorest are just as likely to choose to die at home rather than risk deeper impoverishment of their families by venturing into hospital. The measures also do next to nothing for

a huge section of the rural population that has moved to the cities in recent years.” The rural migrant labor force is estimated at roughly 150 million people in China.

A particularly heart-wrenching aspect of the tragedy has been Sichuan’s schools, many of which collapsed while full of students. Han Jin, head of the planning and development department of the Ministry of Education, told Xinhua that 216,000 structures in the province had collapsed, including 6,898 school buildings. This contrasts sharply with offices and facilities of major multinationals such as Toyota, Intel, and Yamaha—which survived with minor damage.

For the time being, no final death toll of teachers and students has been announced. However, international media are carrying devastating reports of schoolchildren dying, buried under the rubble, within earshot of their parents, or of traumatized children who will not speak after undergoing multiple amputations.

Han announced: “If quality problems do exist in the school buildings, we will deal with the persons responsible strictly with no toleration and give the public a satisfying answer.” However, it is widely known that China’s building codes do not address an earthquake of this intensity, and that contractors routinely flout these building codes in an effort to maximize profits. People have come to calling these constructions “tofu” buildings—after soybean curd, which is often made in a rectangular shape but is easily crushed.



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