Earthquake hits impoverished Chinese region

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A devastating earthquake hit Yushu county, a remote and mountainous area of the Tibetan plateau in the western Chinese province of Qinghai, at 7:49 a.m. on Wednesday. Registering 7.1 on the Richter scale according to the China Earthquake Networks Centre, the quake was followed by five more tremors within three hours, all but one registering 5.0 or higher.

This morning the official Xinhua news agency said the quake, which was just 10 kilometres from the surface, had killed at least 617 people and injured 10,000. About 15,000 houses have collapsed and 100,000 people need to be relocated. The death toll is expected to climb much higher, with an estimated 85 percent of homes and other structures destroyed. Many students may be trapped in collapsed school buildings—just as in the May 2008 earthquake in neighbouring Sichuan province that killed 87,000 people.

According to the limited media reports available so far, residents were using shovels and their bare hands to dig through rubble in search of survivors. Footage on Qinghai Satellite TV showed bodies wrapped in blankets lying on the ground while rescuers pulled strips of concrete from a demolished school building.

The Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is an impoverished area, long neglected by the Chinese government. Near the border of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yushu and surrounding districts were involved in the anti-government protests across the region in March 2008 that were brutally suppressed by paramilitary police. Such are the ongoing tensions that the Associated Press reported that "the garrison of troops who were the first to respond to the quake is stationed in the area to help maintain order. CCTV [China Central TV] reported that soon after the quake, troops secured banks, oil depots and caches of explosives."

The main town of Jiegu, the seat of local government, has largely been flattened. Zhuo Huaxia, a local official, told Xinhua: "The streets in Jiegu are thronged with panicked, injured people, with many bleeding in the head. Many students are buried under the debris, due to building collapse at a vocational school." Zhuo added: "The biggest problem now is that we lack tents, we lack medical equipment, medicine, and medical workers."

Roads and bridges were badly damaged as well as phone and electricity lines. Cracks appeared in a dam, prompting local authorities to issue an emergency evacuation order. Workers, however, managed to divert the waters. Pan Zhigang, the local police chief, told the *People's Daily* that three of the six towns in the prefecture—Qumarleb, Zadoi and Langqian—had been cut off from the outside world. "The death toll will rise because villagers can only pull away bricks and chunks of concrete with their bare hands due to the lack of large excavators to dig out people buried under rubble," he said.

More than 5,000 soldiers and paramilitary police are being sent to the area, but the local airport was damaged slowing their arrival. The airport has no refuelling facility, so planes must carry extra fuel at the expense of cargo. According to the Associated Press, the airport in Qinghai's capital city, Xining, which is 860 kilometres away, was filled with troops, firefighters and rescue teams but they had to wait for buses that would take up to 12 hours to get to Yushu.

The poor infrastructure reflects the fact that Qinghai is among the poorest Chinese provinces, accounting for less than 0.3 percent of the gross domestic product. Average per capita income in 2008 was just 17,389 yuan ($US2,547)—about half the national average.

Local people are struggling with little assistance. A Jiegu resident reached by the *Washington Post* via phone explained: "The situation here is terrible. It's very cold… I

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feel that half the people have died and half are injured. I'm scared. What can we do but sit in the open? Everything is buried. It's dark everywhere."

Karsum Nyuma, a deputy director of Yushu TV, told Xinhua that most of the houses were made of wood with earthen walls, which quickly crumbled under the quake's impact. "Everybody is out on the streets, standing in front of their houses, trying to find their family members." Many residents have fled the town and retreated to tents in the mountains, despite bitterly cold weather.

The poorly-equipped local hospitals have been overwhelmed. Residents said that with limited medical supplies and doctors, survivors with broken limbs could do no more than wait for help. Luo Song, a monk, told the Associated Press that an orphanage had sent children to a hospital, but "there are no doctors, they have only bandages, they can't give injections, they can't put people on intravenous drips."

The most tragic scenes are at schools. The local Red Cross estimated that 70 percent had been destroyed. The county has more than 192 schools, including a number of residential ones, because rural families send their children into town for schooling. Many of the victims were in dormitories preparing to go to classes. Nyima Gyaltsen, principal of Yushu No 3 Primary School, said all 18 single-storey buildings had collapsed and many students were unable to escape. At Yushu Nationality and Normal School more than 30 students were buried and only two were rescued after its four-storey building collapsed.

The deaths of 5,335 students in shoddily-built school buildings during the 2008 Sichuan quake aroused intense public anger in China. Nearly two years on, the government has still failed to enforce safety standards, increase public education spending and end corrupt collusion between officials and construction companies. Instead, it has continued to suppress demands by parents for an investigation into the collapsed schools. On February 9, Tan Zuoren, who led the campaign among parents, was sentenced to five years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power".

In 2008 earthquake, the Chinese leaders initially exploited the disaster as a public relations exercise, demonstrating their professed concern for ordinary people by touring the area. Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao are again trying to display sympathy by ordering officials to "go all out to save the disaster-stricken people" and dispatching Vice Premier Hui Liangyu to Yushu. At the same time, Hu and Wen reminded local authorities "to safeguard social stability in the quake-devastated region".

The *Washington Post* reported that despite the heavy Internet censorship in China, "Web sites nonetheless buzzed Wednesday with skepticism about official accounts of the quake and its aftermath." Some questioned whether the collapsed buildings violated safety codes, while others denounced the decisions by the Communist Party propaganda department to ban all but selected reporters from the area.

Beijing is obviously concerned not only about public anger in Yushu, but that the quake will rekindle memories of the tragedy in neighbouring Sichuan. Media reports indicate that, despite promises of a multi-billion dollar reconstruction, most workers and rural poor in Sichuan remain still trapped in poverty since the 2008 quake. Liu Renjian from Shifang told the *South China Morning Post* today that he was still unable to find a job as truck driver because a collapsed bridge in his area had not been rebuilt. Li Xuequn, a farmer from Yingxiu, said she had lost her husband in the quake and was still living in a temporary shelter. She commented: "I can't say everything on television about survivors getting on with life with government assistance was fake, but they showed only the good side. My side of the story was never told."

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