

Hundreds killed in mudslides in China

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Hundreds of people are dead after massive mudslides in the mountainous Zhouqu district of the northwestern Chinese province of Gansu engulfed several villages last weekend. As of Wednesday, the official death toll was 1,117, but 627 people were still missing and hopes of finding them alive were slim.

Zhouqu district was hit by 97 millimetres of rain in 40 minutes on Saturday night—nearly half its average annual rainfall of 200 millimetres. Early Sunday, the Bailong River burst its banks along a five-kilometre stretch, levelling all in its path with an estimated 1.8 million cubic metres of mud and debris. Three villages were wiped out. In the village of Yueyuan, none of the 300 dwellings is still standing.

Photographs of the area show scenes of devastation. The force of the torrent of mud and debris tore houses from their foundations and tipped over multi-storey buildings.

Yang Jianjie, 20, told the *China Daily* that he had been huddling with his parents and grandfather on the roof of their two-storey house when it was swept away. “Mud and rocks slammed my parents and grandfather in the face and buried them,” he said.

At least 45,000 people in Zhouqu district, out of a total population of 134,000, have been forced from their homes. Some 4,000 tents have been sent to the area, but the mountainous terrain means that there are few safe spaces to pitch them. With roads and bridges destroyed or buried, food and water are scarce.

The government has played up the rescue effort. Ten thousand troops and rescue workers have been rushed to the area. In what has become a ritualised response to disasters, senior Chinese leaders have exhorted rescue

workers to go “all out” to save lives and property. Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to the district was given extensive coverage in the state-run media.

However, rescue efforts have been hampered by the lack of heavy excavation equipment, which has either been buried or prevented from reaching the affected area by flooded roads. Much of the rescue work this week has depended on hand tools.

On Wednesday, rescue crews took emergency measures, using explosives and excavators to drain an unstable lake upriver from Zhouqu town. Vice Minister of Water Resources Jiao Yong assured a press conference that the problem of the barrier lake had been “eliminated”. But residents remained on high alert amid forecasts of further heavy rain.

A farmer, who wanted to be identified only as Yang, told the *Guardian*: “This has happened before. The government knew it [a mudslide] could happen again and did nothing to prevent it.” The man was digging to find five of his relatives buried in the mud. It is clear that the authorities had no disaster plan for the area.

The government blacked out any criticism of the rescue operations and suppressed discussion of the underlying causes of the disaster. Environmentalists and geologists have been warning for years that the overexploitation of local rivers and forests were creating the conditions for landslides in the environmentally sensitive mountain region. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that China’s Internet censors had by Tuesday removed links to some critical research papers.

Government spokesmen claim that mudslides are purely a natural disaster. Minister of Land and

Resources Xu Shaoshi insisted that the disaster was the result of heavy rains in a mountain area prone to landslides. A preceding drought and perhaps the weakening of geological features by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake might have contributed.

There is no doubt, however, that the degradation of the region's environment through the unregulated exploitation of its timber and water resources was a major factor.

The *asianews* web site cited the conclusions of Sichuan-based geologist Professor Fan Xiao that a dam-building "frenzy" on almost every local river, along with deforestation and poor land management, had damaged the environment and increased geological dangers.

China's transformation into the world's largest cheap labour platform has created huge demands for electricity, which has led to a chaotic scramble by local authorities to build power stations. Between 2003 and 2007, 41 hydro-electricity power stations were constructed or under construction in Zhouqu area, with another 12 in the planning stage. In all, there are 156 dams in the affected region.

Professor Fan noted: "Local authorities have ignored daunting warnings about the severe consequences of dam-building and viewed their dams as their key source of taxation." He said that these taxes have "contributed 50 percent of Gannan's revenue". Gannan is a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the south of Gansu province and includes Zhouqu district.

The *Australian* reported that Qiao Jianping, a researcher at the Chengdu Mountain Disaster and Environment Institute, has warned over a decade ago that the Zhouqu district was highly vulnerable to landslides. Qiao said that the area should have had monitoring and warning systems and protective measures.

One local resident who lives on the Bailong River commented on the Internet: "It used to be a river full of fish, but the shameless electricity developers have changed it to a dried-up river bank with stones at the

river bank exposed to the air ... It has been exploited to the last drop of blood and sweat."

Another report by the Lanzhou University in 2006 warned of the dangers presented by the destruction of the forests around Zhouqu for mining and agriculture, causing soil erosion and destabilising hillsides. "The hills have become highly unstable and easily subject to natural disaster of landslides and mudslides," it stated. "The situation is the result of deforestation, exploitative mining activities, construction of hydroelectric power plants and other development activities."

The Chinese government fears that these reports have the potential to spark anger over the failure of authorities, at the local and national levels, to take steps to avoid such disasters. Following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that killed more than 60,000 people, many parents who had lost their children when school buildings collapsed bitterly criticised the shoddy construction. The protests were met with threats and police repression.

Beijing has no intention of addressing the underlying causes of the mudslides in Zhouqu district, or disasters waiting to happen in other areas of China. Flooding across China this year has hit 28 provinces and is the worst in a decade. More than 2,000 people have been killed and one million homes damaged. The total cost is estimated at more than \$30 billion.



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