

Another earthquake devastates New Zealand's second largest city

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23 February 2011

A powerful 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck Christchurch, New Zealand's second biggest city, at 12.51 p.m. yesterday, causing massive damage and multiple loss of life. The latest confirmed death toll stands at 75 but with rescue teams still combing through the rubble and structural damage to at least 10 major buildings, it is feared the final toll could exceed 200.

Civil Defence Director John Hamilton said fatalities were only officially confirmed once bodies had been identified and next of kin informed. So far, 55 bodies have been identified, with another 20 unidentified. Rescue workers yesterday were forced to leave some of the dead in the streets, or trapped in cars and under debris, in order to focus on trying to save survivors.

Christchurch mayor Bob Parker said another 300 people were listed as missing, though not all of them would be trapped in the buildings still being searched for survivors. The final toll may well surpass the country's previous worst earthquake disaster, the 7.1 magnitude 1931 Hawkes Bay quake, in which 256 people died.

Police nightshift commander Superintendent Russell Gibson told Radio New Zealand there were scenes of "absolute carnage" in the central business district. By 7 p.m. yesterday, 24 aftershocks, 11 measuring over magnitude 4 on the Richter scale and 2 greater than magnitude 5, had further shaken the city. Eyewitnesses described the central area as like a "war zone", with bodies lying on streets, buildings demolished, vehicles flattened and water and silt swamping ruptured roadways. The blacked-out city was placed under heavy security. Hundreds of police and about 400 armed forces personnel have been deployed to enforce a declared national state of emergency.

Yesterday's earthquake was the second disaster to hit the city within five months. A 7.1 magnitude quake on September 4 damaged 100,000 of the 160,000 homes in the city and surrounding areas, plus some 400 farms.

Thousands of aftershocks with a cumulative "shaking" time of three hours, including a 4.9 magnitude tremor on December 26, caused further damage and ongoing trauma for the population. The rebuilding process, which had barely begun, was expected to cost more than \$NZ5 billion, making it the world's fourth biggest earthquake-related insurance disaster since 1970.

The latest series of quakes have been significantly more destructive because they were shallower and situated closer to the city. Yesterday's epicentre was just 5 kilometres outside the harbourside settlement of Lyttelton, 10 kilometres southeast of Christchurch. Scientists described the major shock as having a "rolling" side-to-side motion, which causes the most damage. Whereas the September quake had occurred at 4.00 a.m. when people were asleep, yesterday's disaster struck during the lunchtime rush on a busy working day.

Large parts of the city and suburbs to the south, including Lyttelton, which was cut off from Christchurch for some hours, were extensively damaged. A resident of Rapaki, near Lyttelton, told the media that massive boulders—some of them "the size of two-bedroom houses"—had slid down a nearby mountain demolishing at least one property. Outside Christchurch's CBD, the worst-hit suburbs included St Albans, Sumner, Redcliffs, New Brighton and Sydenham, where buildings had collapsed.

Central city buildings, already weakened through previous quakes and many still under repair, finally crumbled to their foundations. The 63-metre spire on the main Anglican cathedral, which had survived the September disaster, toppled into the central square, with people reportedly trapped inside the adjoining building.

Worst hit were densely populated shopping areas such as Cashel Mall and office workplaces. Workers in a meeting room on the fifth floor of the Canterbury TV building crawled out of the rubble at street level after the

building collapsed underneath them. Scores of office workers jumped from upper levels or abseiled down the side of seriously damaged office blocks. Some victims were crushed by falling masonry and lay where they fell.

Essential services were disrupted. At one point power outages hit about 80 percent of the city. Gas mains ruptured, and fires broke out, threatening to engulf the city centre. Christchurch Hospital, which was damaged, was unable to cope and the city ran out of ambulances. Private cars ferried people to medical help and many of the injured were taken to other towns. Other major hospitals, including in the capital Wellington, cancelled all elective surgery to make room for earthquake victims. The Christchurch airport, which also sustained damage, was closed to all domestic and international flights.

About 950 people spent last night at two welfare centres, at Hagley Park and Burnside High School, where blankets, food and sanitation were supplied. Power is still out to large areas of the city, telecommunications have been patchy and many residents have no drinking water.

Hundreds of rescuers worked around the clock, systematically checking for survivors. About 30 people were pulled out alive from buildings overnight—mainly from the Canterbury TV and Pyne Gould buildings, where others are still believed to be trapped. Some of those rescued had to have limbs amputated in order to get them out. Rescuers were still receiving text messages this morning and hearing trapped people tapping for help.

Prime Minister John Key described yesterday's disaster as possibly "New Zealand's darkest day", but added: "There is no reason that can make sense of this event."

Seismologists, however, told the media that the quake was a predictable aftershock following the September 4 disaster. Geological and Nuclear Sciences natural hazards manager Kelvin Berryman admitted that yesterday's quake was not unexpected, but "we were wanting to be rather positive and optimistic that there was nothing big on the way."

Australian seismologist Kevin McCue told the *NZ Herald* that yesterday's events would have an impact on the boundary between the Australian and Pacific tectonic plates and that further devastation could occur, including a large earthquake hitting Wellington, the New Zealand capital. "Wellington has always been considered much more at risk (than Christchurch) because it straddles the plate boundary," he warned.

Yesterday's disaster occurred just as distressed homeowners had begun voicing serious concerns over the myriad problems, delays and unresolved insurance claims

that had arisen from the September quake. Many were already living in precarious circumstances. One community group, Canterbury Community Earthquake Recovery Network, last month said that an independent advocacy service was urgently needed to represent frustrated claimants. Spokesman Evan Smith told the *Press* that an advocate was needed for "almost every street".

The conservative National Party-led government has been reacting to mounting complaints from displaced and frustrated residents with a mixture of indifference and barely disguised contempt. Earthquake Recovery Minister, Gerry Brownlee, told a packed public meeting in the devastated working class suburb of Kaiapoi on February 10 that complainants were "just being impatient".

Most households are dependent on their insurance cover and EQC (Earthquake Commission) disaster funds. The EQC only makes payments, however, to those who already have private home and contents insurance. These people are only able to claim up to \$100,000 on buildings and \$20,000 for contents, after which their private insurance is triggered.

Some 5,000 uninsured homes were damaged in the last quake. Their owners, typically people who were already struggling to make ends meet before the disaster, did not qualify for financial assistance unless they could demonstrate "true hardship". At the time, Prime Minister Key callously declared this group would not receive any special consideration. "The very strong message we need to send to New Zealanders is that they need to have insurance," Key insisted, adding that if the government cheque book was "thrown open", it would create a "moral hazard".



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