Death toll rises from Burma earthquake

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29 March 2011

Eye-witness accounts emerging from the remote Burma-Thailand border area that was struck by a 6.8-magnitude earthquake last Thursday indicate that the toll is likely to be considerably higher than the Burmese military regime's latest official estimate of 75 dead and 110 injured.

Many of the casualties are from Tarlay, a village of about 200 households at the earthquake's epicentre, where almost every building was damaged and many collapsed. It is believed that many bodies remain buried in the rubble.

The epicentre occurred in Burma's eastern-most and largest province, Shan, which also borders Laos and China. The shallow quake, just 10 kilometres beneath the surface, was centred near Tachilek, a small Burmese trading town on the border with Thailand.

Photographs taken by aid workers showed sealed roads ripped apart and wood-framed homes toppled. A Burmese official told the AFP news agency that the death toll might reach about 100, but there was as yet no confirmed increase. "The rescue teams with military members are still trying to help people around these areas," he said.

The true extent of the disaster is difficult to gauge because the Burmese junta has blocked access to outside reporters and appears to have downplayed the casualties, while the regime's opponents have suggested that the toll is far greater, though have not provided substantiating evidence. Nevertheless, there seems to have been widespread death and destruction in isolated villages, some of which lie in areas controlled by ethnic separatist militias.

"At least 150 people were killed," a member of the Red Cross based in Tachilek told the *Irrawaddy* news magazine. "The death toll could continue to rise because local people and relief workers are still rummaging through collapsed buildings," he said. "The efforts are not helped by the fact that there is a lack of trained relief workers, equipment and sniffer dogs."

Other reports confirmed this picture. "So many have died," the editor of the *Shan Herald Tribune* web site, Keun Sai, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "They took more than 80 coffins to Tarlay from Tachilek to bury the dead." Residents had reported that whole families had been wiped out, some buried by landslides.

Puenkham Payakwong, a reporter for the Shan Herald News Agency, told the *Bangkok Post* that more than 150 people were killed. "Many people are still missing and their relatives have been trying in vain to search for their loved ones," he said in a phone interview from the adjacent Thai border town of Mae Sai.

A Chinese-based report also pointed to heavy losses of life. Liang Chunsheng, a Chinese-Thai tourist guide who had entered the disaster zone with a Burmese charity group, told official Chinese Xinhua news agency that Tarlay was "practically destroyed".

The *Irrawaddy* reported that the hospital in Tachilek was struggling to cope with an influx of more than 700 patients, many with life-threatening injuries. Already filled to capacity, the hospital had been forced to leave some patients out in the open. "Every room is full," said a woman waiting outside a room where members of her family were being treated. "Only the most serious cases have been admitted. Everyone else has to wait outside."

Tremors were felt as far away as the Thai capital

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Bangkok, almost 800 kilometres from the epicentre, the Vietnamese capital Hanoi and parts of China. In Thailand, a woman died when a building collapsed in Mae Sai, and 14 hospitals across the northern provinces suffered damage.

Xinhua reported that more than 6,500 people in China's southwest province of Yunnan had been affected by the earthquake. More than 350 students and teachers had been evacuated from a school in Menghai County after the building developed cracks, and people in the southern Chinese city of Nanning, nearly 900 kilometres from the epicentre, had fled buildings.

This is the third earthquake to hit Burma this year. Quakes of 6.4 and 5.4 magnitude struck on February 4 and March 10 respectively. The charity World Vision said around 15,000 people may have been affected in the worst-hit areas. "One of the things that's really emerging is water as a critical need. That's the immediate challenge in addition to temporary shelter," said Chris Herink, the charity's Burma country director in Rangoon.

The ruling junta was widely criticised by Western governments and media outlets for refusing foreign assistance for weeks after cyclone Nargis caused devastation across the Irrawaddy delta in May 2008, leaving more than 138,000 people either killed or missing. But Herink said his organisation was working in the affected areas with the Myanmar Red Cross and UN agencies.

The military-backed government has been anxious to display concern for the victims, in a region where there have been armed clashes in the past with separatists. Major-General Aung Than Htut of the Ministry of Defence led a government delegation, including some deputy ministers of respective ministries, to the area. Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Minister U Maung Maung Swe also inspected Tarlay on Saturday.

Across the border in Thailand, the earthquake, coming on top of the March 11 Japanese quake and tsunami disaster, caused consternation. In Mae Sai, kindergarten teacher Naiyana Yakas told reporters that the tremor was the strongest she had ever experienced and that she spent much of the evening outside with colleagues and neighbours, waiting for aftershocks. "We were afraid it was going to be like Japan," she said.

To head off public disquiet, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva announced a review and overhaul of Thailand's emergency warning system. He also inspected the National Disaster Warning Centre in Nonthaburi province, where he chaired a teleconference with governors from earthquake-prone provinces, including Chiang Rai, Phrae and Nan.

The international response to the earthquake has reflected the rising tensions between the US and China, which has backed the Burmese regime and increased its economic and strategic influence in the country in recent years. Both the Obama administration in the US and Chinese President Hu Jintao sent high-profile messages of condolence to Burma, officially known as Myanmar.

Neither power, however, offered any substantial assistance. China donated just half a million dollars in cash and promised any necessary help that was requested, but the US State Department listed no American offer.

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