

More than 80 killed by earthquakes in southwestern China

Oliver Campbell
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Two earthquakes that struck Yunnan and Guizhou provinces on Friday have resulted in 81 confirmed deaths. The quakes, which measured 5.7 on the Richter scale, have displaced an estimated 200,000 people, and caused injury to at least 820.

The affected areas, located in inland southwestern China, are resource-rich. These have undergone rapid expansion, and become major mining centres, but suffer from high rates of poverty and are substantially less developed than China's coastal regions.

Friday's earthquakes certainly involved powerful and unpredictable natural forces. But the extent of their impact has been magnified by shoddy building standards, poor transport infrastructure, and limited rescue and relief operations.

The largest quakes struck at around 11 a.m. and noon, followed by scores of aftershocks throughout the day. Aftershocks were also reported over the weekend. According to Yunnan's seismological bureau, 279 aftershocks were recorded by noon on Sunday. While the quakes were relatively low on the Richter scale, they occurred at a shallow depth, which contributed to the severity of their impact.

The *New York Times* recounted the experience of Ma Decai, a teacher at a small primary school in the town of Luozehe. When the quake first struck, Ma and his students were eating lunch. "Dirt dropped from the ceiling into our bowls and cooking pots," he said. During a series of aftershocks, significant cracks developed in the schoolhouse, which was made from stone and mud, and the toilet block collapsed.

"Workers used steel in the construction, but they cut corners," Ma commented. "It's not safe."

Peng Zhuwen, a miner, told Xinhua news agency: "It is scary. My brother was killed by falling rocks. The aftershocks struck again and again. We are so afraid."

The initial rescue effort was hampered by landslides, which blocked roads and compounded the difficulties reaching the more remote and mountainous areas. Boulders reportedly hurtled onto roads near zinc mines.

As of early Sunday, authorities claimed to have accessed 90 percent of affected areas, indicating that the number of casualties might rise. The quakes disrupted communication networks in many areas, downing mobile and landline services. Charity groups raised concerns about the plight of children who may have been separated from their families.

Thousands of police, soldiers and reserve forces were deployed over the weekend to carry out rescue and relief operations, and Beijing pledged 1.05 billion yuan (\$170 million) to the operations. But the Chinese government appears to have been unprepared for the disaster, despite southwestern China being earthquake prone.

One official in the town of Jiaokui, in severely-affected Yiliang county, told the Associated Press that many of the town's 110,000 residents who were evacuated after the quake were without shelter. "They are living in the open air now. We are in dire need of tents and quilts. We only received 2,200 tents. Many people have no quilts and are not living in tents."

There are concerns about a lack of clean drinking water, and the danger that the carcasses of dead livestock could spread disease.

In addition to the immediate humanitarian crisis, the earthquake has destroyed significant infrastructure. Authorities estimate that the quakes have caused at least 3.69 billion yuan (\$381.5 million) in direct economic losses in Guizhou and Yunnan.

Mu Xianchun, an impoverished farm worker from Maoping village in Yillang, told AFP that her home and meagre possessions had been destroyed. “All my freshly harvested sweet corn has gone,” she said. “And all of my farming tools. This is my whole life and I have no future now... I am terrified of going into buildings now. We all are.”

The latest disaster has rekindled memories of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province, which resulted in between 70,000 and 90,000 deaths and displaced over 15 million people. The devastation wrought by the Sichuan quake, which also affected the neighboring provinces of Shanxi and Gansu, was amplified by corruption and shoddy construction. The deaths of thousands of children in poorly built schools became a focal point for popular hostility to the Chinese regime, prompting the personal intervention of Premier Wen Jiabao. Following the disaster the central government promised to improve building standards in earthquake-prone regions.

Wen visited affected areas on Saturday, like he did in the aftermath of Sichuan earthquake, telling residents: “Your suffering is the suffering of the party and the government.” As it was four years ago, Wen’s presence was designed to placate local discontent and anger. His government’s promise to improve building standards after the Sichuan quake has not been met.

In an article titled, “Earthquake shattered illusions of growth,” the Chinese state-run *Global Times* admitted: “A quake as strong as Friday’s ... could have caused fewer or even no casualties in a more developed region.” The article noted that the poor construction of homes and endemic poverty had amplified the scope of the disaster. According to the authorities, 6,600 homes

were destroyed in Yunnan, and another 430,000 have been damaged.

In other words, four years after the Sichuan disaster, little has been done to protect those in quake-prone areas, especially if they are poor. Nor is anything likely to change. The *Global Times* asserted—without criticising the government: “To take the time and invest money in the prevention of natural disasters, which are unpredictable and are unlikely to occur, does not seem like a persuasive proposal to many in China.”



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