

Thousands remain missing in India's Himalayan flood disaster

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Two weeks after catastrophic flash floods and landslides in India's Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, the human tragedy clearly exceeds the official death toll of around 900. According to some government spokesman, the number of deaths is far higher. About 3,000 people are still listed as missing.

State assembly speaker Govind Singh Kunjwal said he feared more than 10,000 people may have died, and India's National Disaster Management Authority vice chairman Shashidhar Reddy stated: "It could be more than 10,000."

Uttarakhand Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna, however, sought to play down the toll from what has been dubbed the "Himalayan tsunami." Instead, he told the Press Trust of India news agency: "We will never know the exact number of the dead and the number of people buried or washed away."

Rescue workers blame Bahuguna's state government for the lack of information and the slowing down of the relief process. Officials believe that over 150 villages are among the worst hit, yet essential supplies have reached only 46. Rescue operations by the Indian central government, which placed the army in command, failed to respond the disaster swiftly and adequately, worsening the situation.

Over 160,000 people were affected in the disaster, which damaged 2,232 houses. Entire cities and villages are found buried in mud and sand. The state's road network remains severely disrupted, with 154 bridges and 1,520 roads damaged, according to official figures. Communications have been virtually shut down in one of India's most economically backward states.

Bodies have been recovered hundreds of kilometres downstream in the Ganga and Yamuna rivers. Mass cremations have begun, but some bodies have decomposed beyond recognition. "We are getting

reports from the field that there are rotting bodies lying around, many of them semi-buried in soil and rubble that came down from the mountains," Zubin Zaman, Oxfam India's humanitarian manager, told *Reuters*. He warned of outbreaks of water-borne diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery, as streams and rivers became contaminated with human bodies and livestock carcasses.

Reports indicated that 600 people died just in Kedarnath, a badly affected temple area, but officials would not confirm an attempt by *Reuters* to verify the figure. The *Hindu* reported that the media was not allowed in Rambara, near Kedarnath, where many bodies were said to be scattered.

The rescue operation left victims, including children and elderly, to survive without food, drinking water and medical supplies for many days. "It seemed we were forgotten or simply did not exist," one survivor told the *Hindu* after walking for five days. "On the third day, my husband's kidneys failed, he was unconscious and couldn't move," she said. Despite hunger and physical exhaustion a group of young people have helped her to carry him in rough terrain.

A medical superintendent told the *Hindu* : "There was a woman who came in with a fractured leg, the bone exposed and maggots feeding on it. The leg had to be amputated. A majority of them came in with dehydration, sheer exhaustion and orthopaedic complaints."

Only small helicopters that can carry four or five people were used in the first week. The heavy rains and adverse weather continued, making the few hours of fair weather critical for victims' survival. However, larger helicopters that can carry over 100 people only arrived a week later.

Shortages of essentials have been reported in at least

600 villages that remain cut off, and the lack of proper assessment suggests that the number of places in need of urgent assistance could be much higher. However, the national government pledged only \$US167 million for disaster relief in Uttarakhand, an insignificant amount compared to the scale of the disaster.

In Uttarakhand, “tens of thousands of residents of towns and villages affected by the floods are facing the dire aftermath of homelessness and unemployment,” the *New York Times*’ India Ink blog reported. A.K. Dwivedi, a joint director in the state tourism department, said: “In most of the areas affected by the floods, their entire economy is based on tourism.” Many of those people missing in these villages were bread winners, working as porters and petty traders in tourist areas.

Chief Minister Bahuguna’s bid to downplay the toll is aimed at containing the growing anger over the official neglect of public safety and indifference to the suffering of the victims. His comments came after revelations that the state and federal governments did nothing to install basic monitoring and early warning systems, such as weather radars, for Uttarakhand. There was no meaningful disaster management system, despite warnings from the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The meteorological cause of the destruction is generally agreed to be the fusion of two weather systems, unexpectedly resulting in the heaviest rain for 80 years. It has also been suggested that a glacier or moraine (accumulation of glacial debris) ruptured under severe cloudbursts, unleashing tons of rubble.

If weather radars existed, cloudbursts could have been detected, and a prior warning issued, enabling early evacuations from vulnerable areas.

Shri Manmohan Singh, director of the India Meteorological Department office in Simla, rejected this argument. He claimed: “Uttarakhand didn’t get hit by a cloudburst. It was intense rains.” Nevertheless, other officials admitted that an early warning would have been possible. Avinash Chander, the chief of Defence Research and Development Organisation, said: “Tragedy could have been avoided if weather radars had existed at local level.”

More evidence has emerged of the economic roots of the catastrophe, particularly extensive mining and the construction of dams and hydro electricity projects for

energy supplies. Haphazard access road building has added to the de-forestation.

Writing in the British *Guardian*, Praful Bidwai, an analyst, cited a warning by the Comptroller and Auditor General that the government was “pursuing hydro-power projects indiscriminately.” An appraisal committee had “approved all 262 projects placed before it over six years, without seriously evaluating their impact or the rivers’ carrying capacity.”

Maharaj K. Pandit, director of Delhi University’s centre for interdisciplinary studies of mountain and hill environment, warned that even greater disasters could occur because of the many dams built in the region. “Once they reach their maximum capacity they become ticking bombs,” he told the *Guardian*. “The Himalaya is an earthquake-prone zone, so God forbid, if a major dam ever bursts the destruction it will cause will be unimaginable.”



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