

Earthquake kills more than 350 in Pakistan

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A major earthquake hit Balochistan on Tuesday afternoon, devastating swathes of Pakistan's poorest province. The official death toll has risen to 350 and is expected to climb further, as large areas in the quake zone are yet to be reached. More than 600 people are injured and an estimated 300,000 people have been left homeless.

The earthquake registered 7.7 on the Richter scale, with its epicentre in Awaran district, 270 kilometres north of Karachi. The districts of Awaran, Kech, Gwadar, Panjgur, Chaghi and Khuzdar are severely affected. Tremors were felt as far away as New Delhi and Dubai, but no serious damage has been reported outside Balochistan. A small island, 30 metres high, emerged in the sea off Gwadar as a result of what geologists called a "mud volcano."

National Disaster Management Authority chairman Muhammad Saeed Aleem told AFP that satellite imagery was needed to fully assess the impact. "It is difficult to estimate the real magnitude of the losses because the area is very vast, with small and scattered villages," he said.

Provincial government spokesman Jan Muhammad Buledi told the media: "I fear there may be more bodies buried under the rubble ... We are seriously lacking medical facilities and there is no space to treat injured people in the local hospitals."

Tens of thousands of people lack shelter, food and health care. A survivor told *Dawn*: "There is nothing, patients are dying." A paramedic in Awaran said: "We have no surgery equipment and we are only providing basic first aid to the survivors."

According to a senior district official, Abdul Rasheed Baloch, the devastation was colossal in Awaran, the poorest district, where more than 290 people are dead already. "Around 90 percent of houses in the district have been destroyed. Almost all the mud houses have collapsed," he said.

In the village of Dalbadi, almost all the 300 mud-brick homes were destroyed, Associated Press reported. A survivor, Noor Ahmad, rushed to his home only to find it flattened and his wife and son dead. Doctors were able to treat some of the injured, "but due to a scarcity of medicine and staff, they were mostly seen comforting the survivors."

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sent a contingent of 1,000 soldiers, along with 21 army doctors, 50 paramedics and six helicopters to Khuzdar and Awaran, but the relief effort is dwarfed by the magnitude of the disaster. The government has not announced any financial aid.

Some 700 tents have arrived in Awaran, along with 513 cartons of food supplies, according to assistant district commissioner Naseer Ahmed Mirwani. "We need immediate medical supplies for 10,000 people and food for at least 100,000," he said. "There's not even a glass here to provide water."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that 100 survivors demonstrated over the lack of food and shelter outside government offices in the town of Arawan yesterday. Temperatures in the area were well over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

By assigning the military to carry out the relief operation, the government has heightened tensions in the region, where the army has carried out repeated operations against Baluchi separatist militias. A military helicopter was fired on yesterday.

Successive governments have largely neglected the province, resulting in a lack of basic infrastructure. According to a 2012 survey by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 52 percent of households in Balochistan live below the poverty line.

Balochistan Express editor Siddiq Baloch told the *Christian Science Monitor*: "If the government had paid any attention to these areas from before and built health and medical facilities there, which are currently

non-existent, things would have not been so bad. Many of the critically injured continue to die since they are receiving no help.” He predicted that the death toll could reach 1,000.

The government and opposition parties put on a display of sympathy for the victims, passing a resolution on Wednesday expressing their “grief.” After the vote, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf members walked out of parliament, criticising the government for “insensitivity” and “inaction.” The ruling Pakistan Muslim League countered by saying it was doing enough.

There is a long history of indifference by Pakistani governments, including those led by the PPP and the military, to victims of disasters such as the Balochistan earthquake.

In 2005, a major quake hit northern Pakistan, particularly Kashmir, killing 75,000 people and leaving millions homeless. In 2008 another killed more than 200 in Balochistan and rendered more than 100,000 homeless. In both cases, the inadequacy of the rescue and relief operations compounded the suffering of the victims.

Massive floods in the summer of 2010 inundated one fifth of Pakistan, affecting 20 million people and leaving more than 2,000 dead. The following year, more than 400 were killed and 5 million lost their homes in heavy floods in Sindh province. The flooding was worsened by the fact that powerful landowning families with close ties to the political establishment had overridden irrigation and flood control planning rules.

The US sent a ritual message of condolence for the victims of the latest earthquake but, to date, no financial or material assistance. The lack of aid is in marked contrast to the \$10 billion given to the Pakistani military to assist in the suppression of Islamist militias in areas near the Afghan border, in order to bolster the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The continuing economic backwardness and poverty of Balochistan are not just a product of the neglect of Pakistani governments, but also of the exploitation of the country as a whole by the US and other imperialist powers. In the latest example, acting on behalf of global finance capital, the International Monetary Fund has just imposed harsh new austerity measures on

Pakistan as the price for a \$6.6 billion loan.



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