

Nepal: Sherpa strike following fatal Mt Everest avalanche

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The deaths of 13 Sherpa, with a further three missing and expected killed, in an avalanche at Mount Everest last Friday, has sparked outrage among the mountain guides over the longstanding dangerous and exploitative conditions in which they are compelled to work.

On Tuesday, a meeting of 300 Sherpa at the mountain's base camp voted by a two-thirds majority to cease all expeditions to the summit. Associated Press described the meeting as "rowdy" and noted that "tensions were coursing through Mount Everest's base camp on Tuesday."

The newsagency quoted 67-year-old Marzec as saying: "There are a lot of Sherpa leaving this morning, and in the next two days there will be a huge number that will follow." Tusli Gurung, a guide who was at the base camp on Wednesday said that nearly half the Sherpa had already left.

The simmering frustration of the workers reached boiling point by Monday after it was revealed that the Nepalese government would provide a pittance of 40,000 rupees, or \$US410, in compensation to the families of the workers killed.

The *New York Times* reported on Tuesday that "tempers flared" the day before when "a group of Sherpas marched in a procession with the bodies of six of the dead" in Kathmandu. Mukunda Bista of the Nepal Youth Foundation told the newspaper: "When it ended in the middle of town, they were very, very angry with the government ... If the government is not taking it seriously, there might be more agitation and fighting."

A video published by the *Times* of the procession included comments from Nimi Sherpa—a female relative of Purbal Ongyal Sherpa, one of the men killed. "The government has given families a 40,000 rupee

compensation. It has just increased our sorrow. There are procedural hurdles to get those 40,000 rupees. You might have to spend 80,000 rupees to get it," she said.

The mountain guides have reportedly issued a series of demands to the government. These include increasing the amount paid to the families of those killed to \$10,000, and setting up a shrine to the workers killed at the mountain.

Workers have also made demands relating to longstanding grievances, including that the government increase the value of life insurance payouts that private companies who hire the Sherpa are forced to purchase, to \$20,000, as well as guarantee that the Sherpa will be paid regardless of whether the climbing season this year is cancelled. They are also insisting that the government guarantee the medical bills of workers who are injured on the mountain. They want a fund set up into which 30 percent of government revenue from mountain expeditions is deposited, to be spent on compensation for workers killed and those who are injured.

The bodies of 13 of the guides killed in last Friday's avalanche have been recovered by helicopter, but three remain buried under the ice, presumed dead. "It is just impossible for many of us to continue climbing while there are three of our friends buried in the snow," said Dorje Sherpa, according to AP. "I can't imagine stepping over them."

The Nepali government responded with unmasked contempt to the workers' demands. Sushil Ghimire, the secretary of the Tourism Ministry, denounced the stopping of mountain expeditions on "hooligans." He declared: "It was crowd behaviour—some hooligans were creating problems, but things are getting back to normal."

The government has pledged to meet only some of

the workers demands, including by increasing the minimum insurance payout to just over \$15,000—\$5,000 less than the workers are demanding—and setting up a fund into which five, not 30, percent of government revenue is deposited. The government has also reportedly agreed to construct a shrine for the workers killed. Officials from the Ministry of Tourism flew to Mount Everest on Thursday to attempt to ensure that expeditions resume. The busiest period of expeditions, begins in May.

According to AP, the avalanche last Friday occurred when “a massive piece of glacier sheared away from the mountain along a section of constantly shifting ice and crevasses known as the Khumbu Icefall—a treacherous area where overhanging immensities of ice as large as 10-storey buildings hang over the main route up the mountain.” The tragedy is the single deadliest known incident in history at Mount Everest.

Ethnic Sherpa are renowned for being extremely strong climbers owing to their history of living at high altitudes on the valleys around Mount Everest. For this reason, many Sherpa are hired as mountain guides by private companies which offer clients the opportunity to climb the mountain.

Guided climbs of Mount Everest have become a lucrative, multi-million dollar industry, exclusively available for the well-off few—or those provided with major sponsorships—predominately in the advanced capitalist countries of America and Europe. Many touring companies have been established in North America and Europe, offering clients the opportunity at the handsome price of up to \$100,000 per person.

The Nepalese government has recouped an annual revenue of between \$3 and \$4 million over the last few years by charging for licenses to attempt to climb the mountain. A single license currently costs \$11,000.

Hardly any of this money is received by the Sherpa themselves, who live in constant fear of being killed or disabled and leaving their family in economic crisis. According to *National Geographic*, the Sherpa are forced to make the dangerous journey through the Khumbu Icefall approximately 30 to 40 times a season. There they set up ropes navigating the safest paths for clients, and erect aluminium ladders bridging across crevasses in the ice, as well as carrying heavy loads of fuel, food, ropes, oxygen and tents for clients.

According to figures compiled by *Outside* magazine,

Sherpa have the most dangerous job in the world, with a shocking annual fatality rate of 4,035 per 100,000 full-time equivalent workers over the last decade. This compares with rates of 25 for miners and 124 for commercial fishermen.

The Sherpa are hired by climbing companies and paid the paltry amount of between \$3,000-\$5,000 for the climbing season, plus bonuses if they reach the summit. The guides brave the treacherous working conditions in the hope of helping their families in conditions where the annual per capita income in Nepal is less than \$800. The country of 25 million is one of the most impoverished countries in the world—with an estimated poverty rate of 40 percent.

Permanently disabled Sherpa unable to work receive no government assistance, according to *National Geographic*. In an article published for *Outside* magazine last year, Grayson Schaffer described the impact of Sherpa deaths on the communities.

“Well, this is sort of, you know, the unseen tragedy of Mount Everest, which is the fallout back in the villages. I mean, these villages in the Khumbu are tiny, 40 or 50 houses. And in each of these villages there are houses with missing men where widows and orphans have had their husbands and fathers taken from them by the mountain.”

Commenting on the insurance paid out to workers who are killed, Grayson noted: “You’re talking about \$11,000 that needs to go to replace the income a worker would have for 10 or 20 years. There’s a huge ripple effect that goes unseen by the climbing world.”



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