Earthquake in southern China leaves nearly 400 dead

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A devastating earthquake struck southern China on Sunday, leaving towns and villages in ruins in one of the county's most poverty stricken regions. The area has suffered a number of deadly earthquakes in recent years, including a major quake in 2008, centred in Sichuan Province, that left nearly 90,000 dead or missing.

Sunday's earthquake left at least 398 people dead and more than 1,800 injured. However, as rescuers search for survivors, the death toll is likely to rise. The quake struck in the southern province of Yunnan around 4.30 p.m. and recorded 6.5 on the Richter scale, according to the China Earthquake Networks Center. The US Geological Survey put it at 6.1. The epicenter was located in Ludian county, near Longtouchan town, about 22 kilometers southwest of the county seat of Zhaotong.

Ludian county has a population of about 429,000 people and is located about 366 kilometers from the provincial capital of Kunming. Eyewitnesses described the scenes as resembling a battlefield after bombardment. Up to 230,000 people have been displaced, whether through the loss of their homes or evacuation.

The earthquake struck at the relatively shallow depth of about 10 kilometers. Earthquakes that strike closer to Earth's surface release more energy and thereby cause greater shaking and more damage. According to the state broadcaster CCTV, Sunday's quake was the strongest in the region in the past 14 years. A serious of tremors two years ago in the same region killed dozens of people.

In the city of Zhaotong, resident Ma Liya described the impact. "The aftermath is much, much worse than what happened after the quake two years ago," she said. "I have never felt such strong tremors before. What I can see are all ruins."

Chinese President Xi Jinping called for "all-out efforts" to rescue people still trapped under the rubble. According to the official Xinhua newsagency, 11,000 police and firefighters were on the scene, accompanied by 7,000 soldiers. The government sent 2,000 tents, 3,000 folding beds, 3,000 quilts and 3,000 coats to the disaster zone. However, given the number of people affected, this is clearly insufficient. The finance ministry said it would provide 600 million yuan ($97 million) in aid.

As of Monday, Xinhua reported that emergency workers had rescued at least 32 people, including a five-year old boy. However, it is becoming clear that China is not prepared for a major earthquake, despite the 2008 Sichuan catastrophe.

The bodies of the dead were laid out in the streets while those injured were waiting in pouring rain for food and medical care. Supplies were insufficient. Those with severe injuries requiring surgery were unable to get the care they need.

Many of those assisting in the rescue operations were young people and students. Ma Yaoqi, an 18-year-old volunteer, told the Associated Press on Monday: "I saw dead bodies being wrapped in quilts and carried away. Some were wrapped with small quilts. Those must be kids."

The quake occurred in a remote, mountainous region, where mining and farming are the primary sources of income. The poor have once again been disproportionately affected by the natural disaster. Many of the homes destroyed were old, brick buildings, unable to stand up against the earthquake's force. Footage of the ruins has shown newer buildings still standing.

Among the buildings destroyed was an elementary

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school where young students are believed to have been trapped. According to Zhaotong city resident Zhang Fang: “The school buildings here are not of good quality.”

Many schools were destroyed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, provoking a wave of anger among parents who lost their children. Rather than prepare for future earthquakes, however, the government has done nothing to prevent the present tragedy.

Many of the roads leading to the affected areas have been damaged by the quake or become inaccessible due to heavy rain. The area is also at risk of landslides. Xinhua said rescuers “are also battling the continual downpour that has brought down the temperature in the remote area and made shortages of food and medicine even more pernicious.”

There is conflicting information over the number of people affected. Initial estimates indicated that 12,000 homes were destroyed and another 30,000 seriously damaged. However, Agence France-Presse reported that as many as 80,000 homes were destroyed and another 124,000 seriously damaged. Many residents are afraid to go back inside their homes for fear of aftershocks.

Premier Li Keqiang arrived in the affected region on Monday, telling rescue workers: “Saving one more person means saving the happiness of a whole family. Saving lives is the top priority. Don’t stop! Spare no effort!” Li’s arrival and exhortations follow a well-worn pattern of damage control, aimed at deflecting anger among the survivors and preventing the tragedy from becoming a focus for national discontent and opposition to the government.

Li’s predecessor, Wen Jiabao, followed a similar template during the Sichuan earthquake, as well as innumerable other natural and man-made disasters. He would invariably appear on the scene to express concern and urge relief workers to “maximum effort” before returning to Beijing without addressing any of the underlying issues.

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