

# Earthquake kills thousands in Nepal

W.A. Sunil  
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More than 3,200 people are dead and over 6,500 injured after a major earthquake struck Nepal just before noon on Saturday local time. The death toll is likely to rise sharply as more bodies are pulled from the rubble and rescue teams begin to reach remote villages presently cut off. Thousands of people are homeless and most people are living outside amid fears of continuing aftershocks. Thirty of the country's 75 districts have been affected.

The earthquake registered magnitude 7.8 on the Richter scale and its epicentre was located about 80 kilometres west of the capital Kathmandu. Twelve aftershocks occurred on Saturday alone with another major tremor of magnitude 6.7 yesterday.

The quake was felt as far as the Indian capital New Delhi and badly affected the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in northern India killing 58 people. In Bangladesh two people were killed in the capital Dhaka and the north-western district of Pabna. The shock waves were also felt in Pakistan and in neighbouring regions of China.

The areas in and around Kathmandu, where more than 5 million people live, were among the worst affected. Shoddy buildings compounded by the lack of enforced building standards meant that much of the city was at risk. Many of the older buildings have been reduced to rubble. The historic nine-storey Dharahara tower, re-built in 1832 after the earthquake of that year, collapsed, killing or trapping an estimated 250 people.

Much of the capital is without transport, electricity or power. According to a UN report, "In Kathmandu Valley, hospitals are overcrowded, running out of room for storing dead bodies and also running short of emergency supplies. BIR hospital, a major hospital in Kathmandu is treating people in the streets ... The majority of the population is remaining outside houses due to fear of aftershocks and structural damage to buildings."

Save the Children official Gary Shaye explained to the *New York Times* that Kathmandu was "densely, densely packed." He warned that aid workers were in "a race against time" with the monsoon season due to begin in June. "Even if we had all the plastic sheeting and temporary shelter, is this going to be adequate?" he asked.

Outside the capital, many villages can only be reached by foot or helicopter. World Vision aid worker Matt Darvas told the *New York Times*: "Villages like this are routinely affected by landslides, and it's not uncommon for entire villages of 200, 300, up to 1,000 to be completely buried by rock falls."

An avalanche triggered by the quake killed at least 18 people and injured 61 at Mount Everest base camp.

The Himalayan region including Nepal is especially prone to earthquakes. The last major quake to hit the area was in Sichuan in south-west China in 2008 where some 90,000 people were killed. Nepal was struck in 1934 by a massive tremor that killed more than 10,000 people and another 7,000 in the state of Bihar in India.

Though an earthquake is the product of enormous natural forces, the extent of death and destruction has definite social roots—the product of the lack of preparation and planning and buildings and infrastructure that are not quake-proof. The worst hit and most neglected areas are invariably the poorest.

While it is difficult to make accurate predictions about when, where and with what intensity an earthquake will strike, more general predictions have been made. In 2013, seismologist Vinod Kumar Gaur warned in the *Hindu*: Calculations show that there is sufficient accumulated energy, now to produce an 8-magnitude earthquake. I cannot say when."

However, the Nepalese government has done little to prepare. The country has been mired in protracted political crisis for a decade after the monarchy was abolished and the Communist Party of Nepal Maoist

(CPN-M) was integrated into the political establishment. Bitter haggling between rival sections of the ruling elite stalled attempts to draft a new constitution and none of the major parties has the slightest concern for the plight of workers and the rural poor.

Information and Broadcasting Minister Minendra Rijal told Indian television that the government had “launched a massive rescue and rehabilitation action plan and lots needs to be done.” However, due to lack of necessary heavy equipment and aircraft, rescue operations have been slow, risking many more deaths.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. Oxfam executive director Winnie Biyanyima explained: “Half of Nepal’s 28 million population don’t have access to improved sanitation and live below the poverty line, around one-in-three of them in severe poverty.” Responsibility for the plight of the people rests not just with the Nepalese government but with the major powers that provide a pittance in aid, including to prepare for a major earthquake.

The British-based *Economist* pointed out: “There had in theory been abundant time for many international agencies and other aid donors to plan for an earthquake in Nepal, which is said to have 92 active fault lines. Nepal is stuffed with foreign experts, recruited to focus on precisely this sort of problem.” Yet apart from strengthening some school and hospital buildings, very little has been done.

The major powers while putting on a show of sympathy have provided little in the way of relief aid to date. India has deployed 13 military transport aircraft and a 40-member disaster response team while a Chinese search and rescue team has already arrived in Kathmandu. The British government has made \$7.5 million available to charities working in Nepal and Norway has promised \$4 million.

All of these pledges are far short of what is immediately required, let alone the financial assistance that will be desperately needed for reconstruction. To date, the US, via its embassy in Kathmandu, has offered a miserable \$1 million in assistance and is sending a 62-person disaster response team.

The primary motivation in offering aid is to advance economic and strategic interests. Over the past decade, Nepal, which borders both China and India, has become the focus for intensifying geopolitical rivalry. That has

been intensified by the intervention of the US, which as part of its “pivot to Asia” is seeking to encircle China through a series of military partnerships and ties, including with Nepal.

It is no accident that when the earthquake struck two teams of US Special Forces were already in the country on a training exercise. No doubt in the coming days Washington will up its pathetic offer of aid, all of which will be carefully calibrated to bring Nepal more firmly within the US sphere of influence.



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