

US deploys new “military assets” to Nepal as death toll from earthquake grows

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More than 3,900 people have been confirmed killed and 6,500 wounded by the 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal Saturday, according to local authorities. At least 12 aftershocks rocked the country over the weekend.

Huge lines continue to form in Nepal’s capital of Kathmandu, with residents desperate for access to basic consumer goods. Large areas of the oldest parts of the capital city were destroyed. Thousands fled the capital on Monday, according to Reuters.

The US has seized upon the tragedy to deploy additional “military assets” to the country, bringing the total officially acknowledged US deployment in Nepal to 160 troops, according to the Pentagon. At least two US Defense Department transport planes landed in Nepal Monday, reportedly containing various specialized military units, including at least 70 US Air Force members.

Two teams of US commandos were already present on the ground prior to the quake as part of joint US-Nepal operations begun in mid-2014, the Pentagon said. These forces have been placed on high alert by the US military’s Pacific Command in response to the quake.

In contrast to the rapid deployment of military resources, the financial response of the major powers to the disaster has been minimal, with initial reports indicating that Britain and Norway will contribute paltry aid packages worth some \$5 million each.

The destructive impact of the quake has been magnified by the absence of social infrastructure and adherence to adequate safety and construction standards. This is a product of the rampant corruption within Nepal’s national elite and Maoist-led coalition government, which is subservient to business interests and foreign capital.

As part of their integration into the Nepali political establishment, factions of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) have enforced the dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, including a pro-corporate restructuring of the economy and tax breaks for foreign investors. Forces affiliated with the CPN have supported the banning of strikes and the creation of special cheap labor zones for foreign firms. In return, thousands of former guerrillas were integrated into the establishment in Kathmandu.

After the 2008 election, which saw the Maoists make substantial gains in the legislature, CPN leader Baburam Bhattarai told the *Nepal Times*: “Once the Maoists come to power, the investment climate will be even more favorable. There shouldn’t be any unnecessary misunderstanding about that.”

The earthquake has greatly intensified the economic crisis in the country and is laying bare the conditions of mass poverty that are the correlate of the booming profit-making conditions touted by the CPN. Some 1.5 million Nepalis are reportedly in need of food assistance, and a growing section of the population lacks access to drinking water. Half of the population does not have access to modern sewage disposal.

Reports continue to emerge from the countryside of villages largely or entirely destroyed by massive landslides. In the cities, large numbers are still sleeping outside for fear that aftershocks will produce further structural collapses.

Amidst the wreckage and desperation gripping the vast majority of impoverished country, the US military forces inside Nepal, which include US Special Forces’ “Green Beret” commandos, will focus their efforts on retrieving tourists stranded on popular hiking trails in the Himalayas, according to Pentagon sources cited by the *Washington Times*.

The US will seek to exploit the catastrophe to advance its geo-strategic interests in South Asia. Nepal plays an important role because it borders both China and India. The US is working to bring India into its overall “pivot to Asia” aimed at encircling and containing China.

“Disaster response and humanitarian assistance also plays a key role in soft-power projection,” noted a *Foreign Policy* analysis posted Monday. “Faced with the prospect of ever-greater natural disasters, the US Defense Department is focusing more on its ability to carry out humanitarian assistance and disaster response missions, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.”

The experience of the Philippines in the wake of the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan is instructive in this regard. Despite the formal closure of all US military bases in 1992, the archipelago has seen massive new deployments of US personnel in recent years, including scores of US war ships and tens of thousands of US troops. The typhoon was used as an opportunity to expand these operations.

The Philippines and its territorial waters increasingly resemble a militarized training ground for US-led forces massing in preparation for war with China. Joint US-Philippine war games staged this month simulated assaults against island forts modeled on facilities recently set up by China in contested portions of the South China Sea.

China has recently stepped up its involvement in Nepal’s economy, including plans for a Chinese firm to build a \$1.5 billion hydroelectric facility that was approved this month.

US-Chinese political conflicts over Nepal are already finding indirect expression in the form of the large-scale involvement of US-allied Indian forces, which began in the immediate aftermath of the quake. Hundreds of Indian soldiers and dozens of Indian military aircraft have deployed to Nepal for Operation Maitri, described by *Foreign Policy* as “one of the largest relief efforts ever mounted by India on foreign soil.”

India’s escalated presence in Nepal is undoubtedly the subject of joint planning and dialogue with the highest levels of the US government. Such “humanitarian” missions have been promoted for years as a main benefit of the US-Indian “global strategic partnership.” Washington has increasingly sought to

develop “strategic partnerships” with New Delhi on the basis of such interventions as a means of consolidating support within India’s military and political establishment for the “pivot to Asia.”

Canada’s military, which is conducting operations in the region in close coordination with the US, also deployed a special forces urban operations team attached to the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to Nepal Sunday. Canada stepped up its intervention in South Asia this month with the signing of a new agreement to export Canadian uranium to India in support of the latter’s nuclear weapons program.



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