

# US sends hundreds of troops to quake-stricken Nepal

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The United States has significantly increased its military presence in Nepal as part of the relief operations underway following the devastating earthquake that struck the country on April 25. As it has done in previous disasters in other countries, the Pentagon is exploiting the tragedy to forge closer ties and collaboration with its Nepalese counterparts.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on Saturday that up to 500 troops will arrive in Nepal in the coming days along with four vertical-takeoff Osprey aircraft, Army Chinook helicopters and C-130 cargo planes. According to Reuters, teams of soldiers with portable radars and including airstrip repair experts, will be sent to two provincial airports to facilitate the landing of heavy transports.

The dispatch of US troops takes place amid complaints from the UN and other agencies about the hold-up of supplies arriving at the Tribhuvan International Airport near Kathmandu and their distribution to quake-affected areas. Brigadier General Paul Kennedy, who is in charge of the US operations, told the media: “Nepal serves as the worst case scenario for military planners... It is land-locked and there are only a small number of useable airfields that will handle military-sized aircraft.”

Kennedy claimed that the US was not going to be involved in air-traffic control operations at the Kathmandu airport because that would raise issues of national sovereignty. “The last thing you really want to cede is the air tower, because they control who is coming and who is bringing what,” he said. In fact, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported, US officials have already extracted permission for specialist Air Force personnel to work closely with local air traffic staff.

For all the expressions of concern about the victims of the Nepalese earthquake, Washington is using the

disaster as a public relations exercise for the US military, to establish closer military-to-military relations and as a dry run for intervening in such difficult conditions, including in Nepal, in the future.

The “aid” exercise underscores the scope of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” aimed against China. Every country in the region, including impoverished Nepal, is being caught up in this intensifying geo-political rivalry. Washington’s indifference to the plight of the quake victims is underscored by the fact that the US has provided just \$22.5 million in relief aid to date. Its main interest in Nepal is that it borders China, in particular the politically volatile region of Tibet.

The US developed close relations with the Nepalese monarchy and the military over decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, the CIA helped finance, arm and train right-wing Tibetan exiles based in camps in Nepal to carry out sabotage and attacks across the border inside China. While those militias were abandoned following the US-China rapprochement in the 1970s, the relations continued.

From 1996, Washington provided support the Nepalese army in its ruthless operations against guerrilla fighters of the Nepal Communist Party of Maoist (NCP-M), which was placed on the US State Department’s list of terrorist organisations in 2003. The US was caught off-guard by the political crisis in Nepal in 2006, which led to the abolition of the monarchy, the entry of the Maoists into the political establishment and elections that were held in 2008.

The Pentagon is engaged in training and joint exercises with the Nepalese army. At the time of the earthquake, two US Special Forces teams were inside Nepal engaged in little-publicised high altitude training exercises. Their presence only became widely known

after the 26 elite soldiers were tasked with finding survivors and providing medical assistance.

In comments reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, Nepalese Army Colonel Anand Adhikari praised the arrival of US military forces to provide disaster relief. He declared that the US and Nepalese militaries have “good interoperability.” Adhikari has served in a yearlong military planning group with US Central Command at MacDill Air Force base and is shortly leaving for the US National War College for a study year.

The Nepalese earthquake has become the focus, not of international cooperation, but of international rivalry. China, which is concerned with Nepal being drawn into the US orbit, has sent a 62-member search-and-rescue team and four planes with 170 soldiers as well as promising \$3 million as aid.

India, which is collaborating with Washington, has traditionally regarded Nepal as part of its sphere of influence. The Indian government dispatched 13 military transport aircraft carrying 300 Disaster Response personnel, along with military helicopters, to Nepal within hours of the quake.

Both India and China deny that they are engaged in a competition for influence in Kathmandu. However, over the past three years, India has trebled its aid to Nepal to \$US1.5 billion in a bid to match China. Over the past year, Indian Minister Narendra Modi has twice visited the country.

The tragedy in Nepal is continuing to worsen. Yesterday the country’s National Emergency Operation Centre announced the death toll had risen to 7,040 and the number of injured to more than 14,000. Nepal’s Army Chief General Gaurav Rana warned that final figure on the number of dead would be between 10,000 and 15,000.

According to the United Nations, 8.1 million people out of a population of 28 million have been affected by the quake. Thousands of people, including a number of foreigners, are still missing. Some 600,000 houses have been damaged.

Many people lack food, drinking water, shelters and health care and there is a growing fear of disease epidemics. Three million people require food assistance. According to Information Minister Minedra Risal, Nepal immediately needs 400,000 tents and had only been able to provide 29,000 so far.

Frustration and discontent is growing over the government’s failure to provide adequate relief. A shop keeper exclaimed to the media: “What kind of government do we have here? I have not seen a drop of water or food in four days.” Hundreds of people protested outside the parliament last Wednesday demanding the government increase the number of buses to affected areas and improve aid distribution.

The government and the army fear the prospect of social unrest. Army Chief Rana said: “There is unrest, and we are watching it. Yes, there is the threat of an epidemic, and we are watching it.” He added that many people “would be angry” about the government’s response and stressed that the army and the police are working to “identify local hot spots and control things.”

No doubt the US military will be collaborating with its Nepalese counterparts, not just on issues of aid, but to prevent social and political instability.



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