

Mounting humanitarian crisis in wake of Pakistan-Afghanistan quake

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Tens of thousands of people in the most remote and impoverished areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan face a worsening humanitarian disaster following the 7.5 magnitude earthquake on Monday afternoon that killed hundreds and destroyed thousands of homes.

The quake was centred in the Hindu Kush mountain ranges near Afghanistan's borders with Pakistan, China and Tajikistan. Parts of north-eastern Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan were most severely affected. Tremors were also reported in India, including the capital New Delhi.

The total official death toll has risen sharply over the past two days to more than 380. In Afghanistan, 115 people have been reported dead, with another 556 injured, while in Pakistan the fatalities stand at 256, with over 2,000 more wounded. Three people reportedly died on the Indian-controlled side of Kashmir. All these figures are expected to increase because many of the worst-hit areas are cut off from communication.

According to Afghan officials, the quake has destroyed 7,630 homes and resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 livestock animals, upon which subsistence farmers rely. In Pakistan, over 10,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed, along with 147 schools.

The lack of government assistance and aid in both countries is creating mounting frustrations amid a looming humanitarian crisis. Thousands who have lost their homes are facing the onset of the bitter winter months without shelter or such basic necessities as blankets and warm clothes. Temperatures have already dropped below freezing in the region. Aid agencies are warning that many of those left homeless face the risk of death by exposure.

Pakistan's north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province was the worst affected by the quake, with at

least 220 deaths. The province was hit by region-wide flooding and monsoonal rains in July, when landslides killed some 38 people and destroyed bridges and roads.

Associated Press (AP) reported today that while the Pakistani government has declared a state of emergency, and deployed the military to affected areas, many in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have received no assistance, and have been forced to dig through the rubble of their own destroyed homes.

AP quoted Jamshed Alan, a local councillor in the village of Langa, where 70 of the 180 houses were destroyed and many others damaged. He commented: "No government support has arrived so far, neither has any NGO approached us. The local government started its survey to assess damage only yesterday and nothing else ... Many people whose houses were destroyed or became too risky to live in, sleep under the open sky in the night."

Jan, a 29-year-old driver, said his four-bedroom house had collapsed. "Now we have nothing to eat, cook, wear or sleep because all our kitchen items, clothes and bedding have been buried under the rubble." Jan is the sole wage-earner in his family of ten.

Commentators in Pakistan have noted that the disaster could have been even more severe. In 2005, an earthquake with a 7.6 magnitude resulted in an estimated 75,000 deaths in Kashmir and Northern Pakistan.

Since then, construction of unstable high-rise apartments has continued. Had the quake's epicentre been shallower and closer to the country's major metropolises, the toll could have been far higher.

In Afghanistan, 14 provinces have been affected by the quake, with the most severe damage occurring in Badhakshan, which is sparsely populated and has a poverty rate estimated at around 60 percent. The

province is prone to floods, landslides and earthquakes. More than 1,500 houses in the province have been reported as severely damaged or destroyed. While the official death toll is 11, it is expected to rise significantly. Many villages have yet to be surveyed.

Many of the affected areas in Badhakshan and surrounding provinces have received no assistance from the government or charity organisations.

One elderly woman in Nangarhar province, where at least 28 people were killed and over 100 injured in the quake, told Xinhua News Agency: “No one has asked what has happened to my family ... No doubt, my family needs urgent support and it is the responsibility of the government to assist the affected families at this critical stage.”

The disaster in Afghanistan coincides with a deepening crisis of the country’s US-backed puppet government, amid a Taliban offensive that has gained ground in areas of the north-east, including those affected by the quake. Late last month, the Taliban seized Kunduz in north Afghanistan. It was a debacle for US-NATO occupation forces, and showed that the national government exercises little authority in many areas of the country.

The *New York Times* quoted Malik Sher Mohammed, an elder in Nangarhar province, who commented after the quake: “There is no government beyond the district centre ... They are just sitting nicely in their offices—they can’t even move 20 metres outside their offices.”

The Taliban has reportedly seized control of 18 provinces in the north since June, though government troops have retaken some. Following the quake, the Taliban called for aid to be issued to affected areas under its control, but fighting appears to have continued.

Heavy fighting was reported around Kunduz on Tuesday and in Darqad District in Takhar province. *IRIN News* noted that while the government does not appear to have played a role in earthquake relief operations, it has gone ahead with a pre-planned offensive against the Taliban.

This year has seen widespread civilian casualties in the fighting, with the UN predicting that the toll will match the record high number of deaths reached in 2014. More than 1,500 people were killed in the first six months of this year.

Fifteen years of neo-colonial occupation by the US and its allies, and decades of intrigues by Washington and the other major powers, have led to the dire conditions that exacerbate natural disasters such as earthquakes. The utter criminality of the US occupation was underscored by the US military’s targeted bombing of a critically-needed medical centre in Kunduz at the beginning of the month, killing 22 people, including 12 medical staff and ten patients.



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