

Earthquake in China kills 25

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A major earthquake struck the Chinese province of Sichuan last week, destroying buildings, roads and communications, and leaving many areas vulnerable to landslides.

According to the state media release on Sunday, 25 people died in the quake and 525 have been injured, including 45 who are in a critical condition. Around 85,000 people have been relocated from affected towns and villages in the region, using tourist buses and private vehicles.

The quake occurred at 9:20 p.m. on August 8, in the mountainous area of Jiuzhaigou county and measured 7.0 on the Richter scale at a depth of 20 kilometres, according to the China Earthquake Networks Centre.

Only hours later, another tremor, unconnected to the first, hit the northwestern province of Xinjiang. According to the US Geological Survey, this occurred in Jinghe county, about 2,200 kilometres from Jiuzhaigou and registered 6.3 on the Richter scale. At least 32 people were injured, with two in a serious condition.

The western provinces of China are situated in a tectonically unstable region. Major earthquakes occur every few years as a result of the interaction of the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates.

Aftershocks from the events in Sichuan and Xinjiang are still occurring, with magnitudes of up to 4.8.

Liu Mian, a geophysicist at the University of Missouri, told the *South China Morning Post*: “We don’t know if this is ending, or dying down, so people need to be alert. It’s possible that there’s an even bigger one that will occur.”

Both quakes occurred in sparsely populated areas, which limited the destruction and loss of life. However, their remoteness also hampered rescue efforts. It was roughly 24 hours before most major roads were reopened in Jiuzhaigou by clearing boulders and debris.

In a preliminary analysis of the disaster in Sichuan

province, the National Commission for Disaster Reduction estimated that more than 130,000 houses could have been damaged.

According to the Sichuan provincial government, the damage in Pingwu county, a more urbanised area just southeast of the epicentre, has been estimated as being over 110 million yuan (\$US17 million).

Most of the displaced people are now housed in makeshift tents provided by authorities, waiting out the subsequent tremors and for government assistance. Authorities have set up 200 evacuation centres and have deployed some 600 fire officers and soldiers, according to the *People’s Daily*.

Jiuzhaigou county relies heavily on the tourist industry, which peaks at this time of year. Two thirds of its economy is based on services, according to its economic yearbook, and approximately 40,000 tourists were visiting the area each day prior to the quake.

After the earthquake, important tourist sites have been destroyed, and valleys left prone to landslides that could take years to rehabilitate. Many businesses and tourist operators face the costs of reconstruction without their economic lifeline.

The strength and location of the earthquake recalls the devastating 2008 Sichuan quake that hit closer to the provincial capital Chengdu, killing nearly 90,000 people and injuring approximately 375,000.

That tragedy exposed the reality of class relations in China. Many schools and buildings in poor areas collapsed due to the lack of reinforcement and poor quality concrete, killing the occupants inside. Yet those buildings designed for the use of top officials or members of the wealthy elite survived due to higher construction standards.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced a furore from angry survivors. Fearful that the tragedy would become a focus for national unrest, the government dispatched Premier Wen Jiabao to the area in a show of

support and sympathy. In the end, however, it resorted to arrests and intimidation to suppress demands for a genuine investigation and greater assistance.

In the wake of the latest Sichuan tremor, President Xi Jinping called for “all-out efforts to rapidly organise relief work and rescue the injured people.” Such calls are completely cynical, however, and designed to cover up the lack of measures to minimise the impact of quakes.

Since 2008, little has been done to address the quality of building materials in the countryside. Only 6 percent of residential properties in rural areas conform to anti-seismic design requirements, according to the China Earthquake Administration.

Instances of corruption have also plagued reconstruction efforts. A National Audit Office report in 2012 revealed that 1.4 billion yuan (\$228 million) of the funds made available for relief work after the 2008 Sichuan disaster had been embezzled or illegally transferred.

The life expectancy of buildings in China averages 25 to 30 years, less than half of those in the United States (70 to 75 years), and less than a quarter of that in Britain (132 years). Building codes are frequently sidestepped in the rush to maximise profits.

Reports have also surfaced of new villages built for earthquake survivors in some locations showing cracks in the walls, leaky pipes and faulty wiring. One such area is Longtoushan, in Yunnan province, where a 6.3 quake hit in 2014. “We are terrified,” one anonymous resident told Caixin Global, a Beijing media company, “If a relatively small earthquake could do this much damage, what will happen when a bigger one strikes?”



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