

Huge earthquake causes death and destruction in Myanmar and Thailand

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A powerful earthquake with a magnitude of 7.7 that struck in Myanmar yesterday has killed more than 700 people in that country and neighbouring Thailand. The death toll, however, could rise into the thousands as bodies are recovered from the rubble and information comes in from towns and rural areas.

According to the US Geological Survey (USGS), the quake occurred at around 1.30 p.m. local time at a depth of about 10 kilometres. Its epicentre was near Mandalay in central Myanmar—the country’s second largest city—and it was followed minutes later by a 6.7-magnitude aftershock. The relative shallowness of the earthquake has meant that its impact has been greater.

Based on its analysis of the strength and depth of the quake, the USGS warned on Friday that “high casualties and extensive damage are probable and the disaster is likely widespread.” It predicted that more than 1,000 people may have been killed, with a death toll over 10,000 a strong possibility.

The official death toll in Myanmar so far is 694, with another 1,670 injured, according to an official statement reported by state media today.

In some places, buildings collapsed, Myanmar’s junta leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said in a televised speech yesterday, after visiting a hospital in the capital Naypyidaw. The junta declared a state of emergency across six regions.

State media reported that the quake caused the collapse of buildings in five cities and towns, as well as a railway bridge and a road bridge on the Yangon-Mandalay Expressway. Damage is likely to be far more extensive. Limited on-the-spot reportage from Myanmar includes photos of the twisted remains of a bridge over the Irrawaddy River near Mandalay and video footage of the spire of a pagoda collapsing.

A Mandalay resident told Reuters: “We all ran out of the house as everything started shaking... I witnessed a five-storey building collapse in front of my eyes. Everyone in my town is out on the road and no one dares to go back inside.”

A rescue worker in Mandalay told the newsagency that the bodies of 30 people had been recovered from collapsed multi-story apartment blocks. “I have never experienced anything like this before—our town looks like a collapsed city,” he said, estimating that about a fifth of the buildings had been destroyed...

“We received calls for help from people from the inside, but we cannot help because we do not have enough manpower and machines to remove the debris, but we will not stop working.”

A Red Cross spokesperson in Yangon, the country’s largest city, said the damage to public infrastructure included roads, bridges and public buildings, adding that there were also concerns over the stability of large-scale dams.

In his televised address, General Hlaing made a direct appeal for international assistance: “I would like to invite any country, any organisation, or anyone in Myanmar to come and help. Thank you.”

The UN, EU and US, along with other countries and agencies, have promised aid, but none has spelled out what they are planning to provide.

Responding to reporters, Trump tossed off the offhand remark: “It’s a real bad one, and we will be helping.” His administration, however, has already eliminated more than 90 percent of US foreign aid contracts and \$60 billion in overall international assistance.

All USAID direct hire personnel, with few exceptions, internationally have been placed on administrative leave. Secretary of State Marco Rubio

announced yesterday that most would be fired.

The Myanmar disaster is being compounded by the country's ongoing civil war. It erupted after the military seized power in a coup in February 2021, deposing the democratically-elected government headed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The junta violently cracked down on protests, shooting demonstrators on the streets. Thousands were killed and many more arrested. Others fled to regions controlled by separatist ethnic militias that have been battling the military for decades.

Over the past four years in these areas, a coalition of forces has established a National Unity Government (NUG) in opposition to the junta.

In a phone call with Reuters, Zin Mar Aung, a top NUG spokesman, said troops from militias aligned with it, known as the People's Defence Forces, would provide humanitarian help. "It's very serious, we need humanitarian and technical assistance from the international community."

The impact of the earthquake was felt beyond Myanmar. In Bangkok, Thailand's capital, over a thousand kilometres from the epicentre, a 33-storey building under construction collapsed into a heap of rubble. So far, 10 people have been confirmed dead, but at least a hundred others are missing.

Bangkok was declared a disaster zone after tremors caused buildings to sway dangerously. Thousands of people in the megalopolis of 17 million were forced to evacuate their homes and workplaces.

Later yesterday, Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra told residents they could return home, saying the affected area was limited in scope. The full extent of the damage in Thailand, however, is not known.

Tremors were also felt in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan, which neighbours Myanmar. In the border town of Ruili, residents ran away from a high-rise residential building as it shook violently, as shown by a video posted on the Weibo social media platform. Violent shaking was also felt by people in the Chinese city of Mangshi, about 100 kilometres northeast of Ruili.

The earthquake occurred on the Sagaing fault, running roughly north-south. It marks the boundary between the Indian tectonic plate to the west and the

Eurasian plate to the east. According to Bill McGuire, a professor of geophysical and climate hazards at University College London, it was probably the biggest quake on the Myanmar mainland in three-quarters of a century.

Given the length of time since the last major earthquake, it is likely that many of the buildings in Myanmar, one of the world's poorest countries, have not been constructed to withstand quakes.

"A combination of size and very shallow depth will maximize the chances of damage," McGuire said. "It is highly likely that build quality will generally not be high enough to survive this level of shaking, and casualty numbers will almost certainly climb significantly."

Yesterday's earthquake was the strongest recorded globally since a 7.8- magnitude quake struck Turkey and Syria two years ago, causing more than 60,000 fatalities.



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