

Conditions rapidly worsening for victims of Myanmar earthquake

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A humanitarian disaster is unfolding in Myanmar following the devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake there on Friday. As of early Monday morning, the death toll had risen to 1,700, though this figure will certainly grow as rescue teams search the rubble and reach outlying areas. Recovery efforts are underway in neighboring Thailand, which was also affected.

The earthquake struck along the Sagaing Fault near Mandalay, the second largest city in Myanmar. Other major cities along the fault include Yangon and the capital of Naypyitaw. The earthquake as well as powerful aftershocks knocked down buildings and bridges while destroying roads, essentially flattening whole towns. There are also serious concerns about the state of Myanmar's dams.

In addition to those killed, more than 3,400 have been injured while many more remain missing. The US Geological Survey estimates that the death toll could surpass 10,000.

Myanmar is one of the poorest countries in the world and many of the buildings were not constructed to withstand earthquakes. Brian Baptie of the British Geological Survey told the Associated Press, "When you have a large earthquake in an area where there are over a million people, many of them living in vulnerable buildings, the consequences can often be disastrous."

These conditions are making it difficult for healthcare and rescue workers. Damage to roads, airports, and other infrastructure is causing delays in getting aid to those who need it. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated that a "severe shortage of medical supplies is hampering response efforts, including trauma kits, blood bags, anesthetics, assistive devices, essential medicines, and tents for health workers."

OCHA further noted, "Thousands of people are spending the nights on the streets or open spaces due to the damage and destruction to homes or fearing further quakes."

Han Zin, a resident of the city of Sagaing, located near the earthquake's epicenter, told Reuters, "What we are seeing here is widespread destruction—many buildings have collapsed into the ground... We have received no aid, and there are no rescue workers in sight." He added that much of the town is without electricity and that drinking water was running out.

Most of the efforts to provide aid and locate people trapped under buildings has been conducted by self-organized groups of residents who lack the necessary tools and equipment to dig people out of the rubble. Rescuers have also cited fears that many buildings are unstable and could collapse, preventing them from searching for survivors.

The destruction could potentially equal as much as 70 percent of Myanmar's GDP, which stood at \$US64.28 billion last year. Prior to the earthquake, the World Bank also predicted the economy would contract by 1 percent at the end of the fiscal year this month. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, a political scientist at the University of Bristol who is from Myanmar stated, "In essence, Myanmar is wholly unable to deal with the shock and its aftermath."

Several countries have dispatched rescue teams, including China, Russia, India, and Thailand. Beijing sent 135 rescue personnel and necessary supplies while pledging \$US13.8 million dollars.

The Trump administration in the US has pledged support, but a three-person team from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is not expected to arrive until Wednesday. Even as the earthquake was unfolding, Trump was gutting the organization. Last

Friday, USAID employees in the process of preparing a response to the earthquake received emails notifying them that they had been fired.

Other natural disasters have also battered Myanmar in the past year, including Typhoon Yagi, impacting an estimated 2.4 million people as well as half of the country's agricultural firms. This led to a sharp increase in food insecurity, which is now being exacerbated.

In Thailand, which also felt the effects of Friday's earthquake, at least 18 people have been killed in Bangkok, including 10 workers constructing a high-rise building. An additional 78 people are missing and some people are believed to still be alive under the wreckage. Naruemol Thonglek, the wife of one of the missing workers, who is from Myanmar, said, "I was praying that that they had survived, but when I got here and saw the ruin... where could they be?" Other fatalities also occurred at construction sites.

Many people in Bangkok were unable to return to their homes, pending safety checks. The city government said it had received more than 9,500 reports of building damage. Residents shared pictures online of their homes with cracks in them. People were forced to sleep in parks, with the city providing portable toilets and drinking water.

The earthquake disaster could lead to serious political unrest, particularly in Myanmar where the ruling military junta has been in control since staging a coup in February 2021. This intensified armed conflict involving separatist armed militias, which has been ongoing in the country for decades. The junta, which is highly unpopular, holds a fragile grip on power and its inability to provide aid could trigger a mass anti-government movement.

Junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing stated over the weekend, "All military and civilian hospitals, as well as healthcare workers, must work together in a coordinated and efficient manner to ensure effective medical response."

However, the government has restricted aid from reaching many of those displaced by the civil war. The National Unity Government (NUG), a coalition of forces opposed to the junta, controls large parts of the Sagaing region.

The NUG stated Saturday night that there would be a partial two-week ceasefire in earthquake-affected

regions, beginning the next day. It also stated that it would cooperate with the UN and aid organizations "to ensure security, transportation, and the establishment of temporary rescue and medical camps."

The military has reportedly continued air strikes against opposition forces, including in the states of Kayin and Shan, both of which border the Mandalay region. The UN's Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews described the situation as "nothing short of incredible." He stated, "Anyone who has influence on the military needs to step up the pressure and make it very clear that this is not acceptable."

Over the last four years alone, more than 75,000 people have been killed and more than 3.5 million people have been displaced. Furthermore, throughout Myanmar, an estimated 19.9 million people, or slightly more than one-third of the population, were already in need of aid before the earthquake, with millions facing food insecurity.



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