Numbers of dead and missing climb in Nepal catastrophe as new barrier lake threatens second flood

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The death toll in the catastrophic flood that struck Nepal's northern border region on Wednesday rose to at least 579 people as of 8 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time Friday. Another 1,924 are missing according to Nepal's disaster relief agency. Five people have died in Tibet with 588 individuals reported missing.

The flood was triggered by a massive ice-and-rock avalanche from a glacier-covered Himalayan slope, a calamity that is inextricably linked to accelerating global warming and inadequate public preparation combined with decades of government neglect internationally.

Satellite evidence indicates that a large mass detached from a glacier-covered slope in Tibet and plunged into the valley below. The avalanche was so immense that it generated a seismic signal measured at magnitude 5.2 by instruments in Germany and by the United States Geological Survey.

The collapsing mass descended through the valley, gathering rock, earth and debris before blocking a river and creating a temporary dam. When water broke through or overtopped the obstruction, it sent a torrent of water, boulders and mud downstream through towns, settlements, roads and tourist areas on both sides of the Nepal-China border.

Those missing residents, workers and foreign tourists caught in isolated areas after roads and communications were severed. Hundreds of tourists were among those reported unaccounted for and the official estimate says that 517 are foreign nationals.

Meanwhile, the avalanche and landslide have created a barrier lake near the confluence of the Tsogyal and Purupqiangzangbu rivers. Chinese water authorities initially described the landslide dam as facing a "high risk of breaching," as the blockage impeded river flow and impounded a rapidly growing body of water.

The lake was reported to hold roughly 3 million cubic meters of water, with as much as another 3 million cubic meters projected to accumulate in the following days. Such a buildup poses a grave threat because an earthen and debris-filled natural dam can erode suddenly, releasing accumulated water in a destructive surge downstream.

Chinese authorities judged the immediate risk from an overflow more manageable and permitted suspended rescue work to resume. This does not eliminate the underlying danger of unstable slopes, blocked rivers and saturated debris that remain in an area where roads, bridges and communities have already been battered by the first flood.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), a Kathmandu-based regional climate and mountain research institution, warned that this new blockage is part of a wider hazard across the Himalayas' river systems. The formation of temporary lakes can turn the initial avalanche into a prolonged emergency, leaving downstream populations exposed to a secondary sudden flood.

Search crews are working across terrain buried under mud, rock and destroyed structures, and the task is made more difficult by damaged roads, unstable ground and the continuing risk of further flooding. Numerous videos posted on social media show rescue workers pulling and carrying mud-covered survivors to safety.

The rescue workers have searched through the remains of communities engulfed by water and mud, seeking any survivors and recovering the dead. Those who escaped did so under conditions of extreme danger

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as a wall of muddy water, rocks and debris raced down narrow valleys, as depicted in social media videos, leaving little time to flee.

Rescue operations have resumed searches after the assessment of the barrier lake's immediate risk was lowered. The work is proceeding amid a present danger to rescuers and survivors alike with landslides, river surges and the possibility that debris dams upstream could fail.

Scientists have identified the glacial avalanche as the immediate trigger, but the broader cause lies in the accelerating destabilization of high-mountain environments under global warming. Saswata Sanyal, a disaster-risk-reduction specialist at ICIMOD, emphasized that the event was not unprecedented.

Sanyal said, "The Lhende Khola has flooded twice in 14 months, this time triggered by an ice rock avalanche from a glacier on the Nepal side that blocked the river and released a sudden surge downstream."

The previous events were warnings and point to a known and recurring danger rather than an unforeseeable act of nature. High-elevation regions of the Himalayas have been shown for years to be particularly vulnerable to global warming, which contributes to glacier retreat, destabilized ice and rock, changing rainfall patterns and the expansion of hazardous glacial lakes.

The new catastrophe demonstrates how a glacier collapse can trigger an avalanche that creates a blockage, the blockage creates a lake, and the lake in turn threatens a second surge of water and debris. The danger is intensified when remote populations lack adequate early-warning systems, evacuation routes, resilient infrastructure and public resources.

More fundamentally, as the WSWS explained on Friday, "The scale of the death and destruction cannot be explained by geology or weather alone. It is the product of climate change, decades of state neglect and the subordination of public safety to profit and the budgetary demands of capitalism."

The responses of US and European imperialism to the unfolding crisis are themselves a measure of the negligence of the world's ruling classes to the man-made disaster. The White House issued a statement on Wednesday that the US "extends its deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of those who lost their lives in the devastating flash floods."

President Trump called the flooding "terrible" and said the US had contacted Nepal's leadership. He further said that Washington would provide "anything" Nepal needs. The "anything" that Trump was talking about apparently includes a miniscule $500,000 for emergency shelter, relief supplies and water, sanitation and hygiene assistance through Catholic Relief Services.

For its part, the EU allocated €2 million in "emergency humanitarian aid" for food, healthcare, clean water, sanitation, shelter and other urgent relief. EU-funded partners were already distributing pre-positioned shelter materials and relief items, and Brussels sent its Asia Rapid Response Coordinator to support coordination.

Capitalist governments internationally have failed both to halt climate change, to prepare populations for its foreseeable consequences and, when the inevitable happens, they offer up a pittance in a desperate situation. The devastating flood, the mass death and disappearance of residents and tourists and the continuing threat posed by the barrier lake are all a concentrated expression of the failure of the capitalist system.

The emergency in Nepal and Tibet is a warning that the intensifying instability caused by the warming Himalayas is colliding with threadbare public infrastructure and the absence of an internationally coordinated response capable of preventing disaster.

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