

Hundreds of workers trapped in flooded tunnels, as Nepal deaths near 1,000

Kevin Reed
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Hundreds of workers remain trapped in the flooded tunnels of Nepal's hydropower plants after a wall of glacial debris tore through the country's northern valleys, and rescue crews from Nepal, India and China are drilling, digging and blasting to reach them.

Five days after a glacier-triggered landslide and flash flood devastated Nepal's border region, the country's National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority reported 939 confirmed deaths, 1,473 injured and 3,925 people missing or unaccounted for as of Monday.

The fast moving, dense slurry—a churning mix of meltwater, glacial ice, rock, boulders, mud and uprooted material—behaved like wet concrete racing downhill and destroyed settlements, transport links and hydropower sites across the Himalayan watershed last Wednesday morning.

Across the border in China's Tibet Autonomous Region, authorities had reported at least 16 additional deaths and 546 missing people.

The hydropower sector has emerged as one of the hardest-hit parts of the disaster. Authorities said 639 hydropower workers from sites across Nepal were missing as of Monday, while the Independent Power Producers' Association had previously put the number of missing or unaccounted-for people connected to the sector at about 933.

The most difficult operation involves workers trapped in hydropower tunnels after the flooding. Nepal's Prime Minister's Office said 350 people had been rescued from a tunnel, but more than 100 remained trapped as operations continued; another 533 residents had been moved to safety from flooded areas.

At the Trishuli 3A plant in Rasuwa District, army rescue teams drilled into the upper section of the mud-choked tunnel on Saturday evening, pumped in air and lowered a camera to search for survivors. On August 29 alone, 208 workers were brought out of a third Trishuli project, 43 of them foreign nationals, including 38 Chinese and five Indian workers. India and China have sent specialist rescue teams and equipment to support the operation.

Rescuers face a hazardous underground environment as

tunnels can be blocked by sediment and debris, flooded by seepage, damaged by shifting rock, or cut off by collapsed entrances and destroyed roads. The situation also limits the use of heavy equipment and makes ventilation, communication, lighting, food, water and medical care urgent operational concerns. The BBC reported that a controlled explosion was detonated as part of attempts to reach the trapped workers.

The rescue effort has resulted in a substantial number of evacuations. Nepal's disaster-response agency said more than 7,500 people had been rescued since the flood struck on August 26.

The sharply rising scale of the human devastation reflects the difficulty of compiling a reliable count in remote, mountainous terrain where roads, bridges, communications infrastructure and work camps have been swept away.

Earlier in the response, Nepalese authorities said hundreds of tourists, including large numbers of foreign nationals, had been cut off or unaccounted for. The numbers are escalating as officials receive reports from isolated villages and industrial sites.

Of the people missing in Nepal, 592 are foreign nationals. Chinese authorities said 261 foreign nationals from 23 countries remained missing in Tibet, amid a broader Tibetan missing-person count of 546.

Search teams have shifted increasingly from rescue to recovery in sections of the river system. Bodies have washed far downstream, including into neighboring India, illustrating the enormous force of the flood and complicating efforts to identify victims.

The recovery operation is grim because the torrent carried rock, ice, mud, trees, vehicles, construction equipment and entire structures through narrow Himalayan valleys. Bodies recovered days later may be buried in debris, heavily damaged or found far from the places where families last saw their relatives, making visual identification unreliable and requiring authorities to depend on missing-person reports and other forensic methods.

The disaster also has an international dimension: Workers

at hydropower projects, foreign tourists and pilgrims were among the missing. South Korean officials initially said nine of their citizens working at a hydropower plant in Nepal were among those unaccounted for.

The scale of the deaths has forced authorities to prepare for collective burial arrangements where bodies cannot be rapidly identified or released. A mass grave is being dug to handle the dead recovered from the flood zone, a measure driven by the growing death toll, difficult transport conditions and the urgent public health need to manage remains safely.

The mass grave is being dug in Devghat forest in Chitwan District, in south-central Nepal, nearly 200 kilometers (about 125 miles) downstream from the Rasuwa flood zone. Authorities had dug hundreds of graves there and buried at least 96 unidentified bodies by Saturday, with DNA samples and identification records being retained so relatives may later establish identities and conduct customary funeral rites.

That process is especially fraught in Nepal's Himalayan communities, where families are still arriving in search of missing relatives and where burial or cremation decisions can involve cultural and religious considerations. Before unidentified bodies are interred, authorities face pressure to record distinguishing features, preserve personal belongings and collect whatever evidence might later allow families to establish a victim's identity.

Scientists from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, based in Kathmandu, and climate specialists said an avalanche from a glacier was the likely cause of the release of the destructive mixture into river valleys.

Scientists warn that a warming Himalayan environment raises the probability of cascading hazards. Rising temperatures can destabilize glaciers and slopes, alter snow and ice melt, expand or create glacial lakes, and increase the danger that an avalanche, landslide or lake outburst will transform into a fast-moving flood. The Himalayan region is warming faster than the global average and is particularly exposed to rainfall-driven floods and landslides.

Nepal's foreign minister called for a global effort to tackle climate change, arguing that Nepal is among the countries suffering acutely from rising temperatures despite its relatively limited contribution to global emissions. The statement framed the catastrophe not solely as a national emergency but as evidence of a shared global climate problem requiring international action.

A second emergency is still developing upstream as the landslides and debris have blocked river channels, forming barrier lakes. These temporary lakes can become highly dangerous when water accumulates behind unstable natural dams, because a breach can send another sudden surge

downstream.

One barrier lake briefly interrupted rescue operations before officials judged immediate risks manageable. Nepal and China were monitoring two lakes upstream of the main flood zone, with an official warning that the flood threat would continue until both were fully drained. Satellite imagery also showed a second lake growing larger with no visible outlet, raising concern that water pressure could continue to build.

For communities and rescue teams in the valleys below, that danger means the crisis is not over even as the search continues. With nearly 4,000 people still missing in Nepal alone, recovery operations must proceed alongside evacuation planning, river monitoring and the difficult task of preventing another catastrophic release of water and debris.

Nepal's flood catastrophe cannot be understood as an unavoidable "natural" disaster solely caused by the glacial collapse which triggered the raging deadly torrent. The scale of deaths, displacement and infrastructure loss is directly attributable to capitalist-induced climate change, decades of neglect internationally by a social system that places profit and austerity above public safety and preparedness.

A primary role has been played by the major imperialist powers, especially the US, in the criminal neglect of the climate crisis that is having a disproportionate impact on billions of working-class and poor people around the world. Fragmented national responses to the crisis are incapable of addressing cross-border climate hazards, which are impacting every country in the world.

Only an internationally coordinated effort to utilize the latest in climate science and comprehensive solutions to reverse warming trends, led by the working class and based on socialist economic planning, can effectively deal with the growing existential threat.



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