The nation came to a standstill yesterday in a deeply moving display of respect and remembrance for victims of the Sichuan earthquake. Millions, from state leaders in Beijing to rescue workers toiling amid the rubble to find survivors of disaster, marked an emotional three minutes’ silence in an unprecedented show of public mourning. Many in Hong Kong took part.

Traffic on busy roads came to a halt, construction work stopped, stock exchanges ceased trading and flags flew at half-staff. The only sound to be heard was the haunting wail of air-raid sirens and car horns symbolising the suffering caused by the country’s worst natural disaster in 60 years.

The widespread outpouring of grief, at the beginning of three days of national mourning, reflects the terrible scale of the tragedy which befell Sichuan and its impact on the country. But it also demonstrates a newfound feeling of togetherness – a people united not only in grief but in support for all those affected by the earthquake. There is a determination to overcome adversity. This will be needed in the hard months which lie ahead.

The 50,000 dead, 200,000 injured and 4.8 million left homeless will not be forgotten. The best tribute to the victims would be to rebuild their stricken communities and make them stronger, so that a catastrophe of this magnitude can never occur again.

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