The scale of the devastation from the Sichuan earthquake was revealed in heart-rending detail yesterday, as rescuers worked flat out in the area hit by the quake, which struck under the epicentre of Wenchuan county, just north of the provincial capital Chengdu.

Soldiers and emergency workers rushed to the quake zone housed towers reduced to rubble, thousands dead or trapped and stranded victims gnawing for food and trying to come to terms with the catastrophe.

Racing against time — and hampered by bad weather — the workers faced the daunting task of accessing the wreckage.

In some areas up to 39 per cent of the buildings had collapsed in Monday’s 7.8-magnitude quake, the worst to strike China in more than three decades.

Strong aftershocks continued to rattle the region as PLA soldiers arried at the epicentre of Wenchuan county after the quake struck.

The official death toll in Sichuan alone had risen to 21,930 by 7pm last night, with 18,832 injured and an estimated 14,000 still buried under the debris. A further 1.3 million homes are damaged.

The toll was staggering, with Sichuan Vice-Governor Li Cheshun saying yesterday’s official figures were based on “imcomplete statistics.”

The provincial government said 16,118 people died in the quake. But Jane Cai, a 17-year-old student from Wenchuan, was among the lucky few to survive in an area where thousands were still buried in collapsed buildings.

“Over 70 per cent of the roads are damaged,” Mr Wang said. “It might take two days to reopen the roads.”

If the Olympic torch relay has rallied Chinese and fired up their patriotism, the country’s united effort must now be to help the survivors and the families of those killed in the quake.

Sichuan toll rises to 12,000, with 26,000 injured and 10,000 still under the rubble

Strong aftershocks continue to rattle region as PLA troops arrive at epicentre

Revealed: the full horror

Jane Cai

The quake hit the Sichuan province, where more than 106,000 people live in the quake zone of Sichuan town.

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