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Quake aftermath

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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



Rescue workers remove the bodies of children from the rubble of a collapsed primary school in Dujiangyan. Photo: Reuters

Jane Cai

The scale of the devastation from the Sichuan earthquake was revealed in horrifying detail yesterday, as rescue workers made first contact with victims in the worst-hit areas.

Soldiers and emergency workers rushed to the quake zone found towns reduced to rubble, thousands dead or trapped and dazed survivors grieving for loved ones and trying to come to terms with the catastrophe.

Racing against time – and hampered by bad weather – the workers battled to rescue those buried beneath the wreckage.

In some areas up to 80 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 arrived at the epicentre of Wenchuan county 24 hours after the quake struck.

The official death toll in Sichuan alone had risen to 12,000 by 7pm last night, with 26,000 injured and an estimated 10,000 still buried under the rubble. Some 3.46 million houses are damaged.

The toll is expected to keep climbing, with Sichuan Vice-Governor Li Chengyun saying yesterday's official figures were based on "incomplete statistics".

The provincial government said 161 people died as of 4pm in Aba Autonomous Prefecture, which governs Wenchuan county. However, in the county's Yingxiu township, which a population of 12,000, about 3,000 people had survived, Xinhua reported last night, suggesting that 9,000 are missing or feared dead.

Search-and-rescue efforts were the top priorities for today and tomorrow as the nation mobilised resources and raced against time to save lives, Wang Zhenyao, director of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' disaster relief department, said in Beijing.

"The rescue work will last for a relatively long period in some areas. Depending on housing construction, some people can survive for a long period. Giving up is out of the question at the moment," Mr Wang said.

Premier Wen Jiabao, who arrived in Sichuan within hours of the earthquake, ordered the roads to Wenchuan cleared before midnight yesterday so urgently needed help could reach the area.

But the Ministry of Communications said extensive repair work was needed and it might take two days to reopen the roads.

Due to torrential rain, an air force mission to take pictures of the strick-

"Over 70 per cent of the roads are damaged. All the bridges have collapsed. No vehicles can pass. A great number of people are buried. Injured people are in desperate need of aid. Food and water are in extremely short supply," Xinhua reported from Yingxiu township last night.

Elsewhere in Sichuan, the earthquake's destructive force could easily be seen – boulders lay blocking cracked roads, bodies were gathered, survivors searched or grieved for relatives and doctors were busy helping the injured.

Dong Xianquan, a 39-year-old resident of Beichuan county, 34km from Wenchuan, was among the lucky few to survive in an area where more than 7,000 have been confirmed dead.

He used his chin, elbows and knees to inch forward and claw his way out of the ruins of a five-storey building.

"Finally I crawled out of the rubble. I thought I had reached the street, only to find the street didn't exist any more," he said.

"Out there it was all piles of rubble, rocks, mud and bits and pieces of whatever I could now hardly recognise. Screams for help came from all around."

Visiting the Sichuan cities of Shifang and Dujiangyan, Mr Wen urged prompt rescue efforts at a primary school where more than 100 students were still buried in collapsed buildings and tried to assure crowds that there would be enough food.

"Don't worry. You will have milk powder soon," Mr Wen told an inconsolable child in a tent.

In an unusual move, mainland media carried rapid and comprehensive coverage of the disaster. Experts said it could help quench negative reports and maintain social stability following the Tibet unrest in March and in the lead-up to the Olympics.

In addition, the Olympic torch relay will be scaled down in the wake of the quake.

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

Editorial A18

en area was cancelled yesterday afternoon. But the first batch of more than 1,000 PLA soldiers arrived at the county in the afternoon on foot.

More than 106,000 people live in the 4,084 sq km county, which is surrounded by mountains and is 74 km northwest of the provincial capital, Chengdu.

No accurate casualty figures are known because there has been no real contact with the county since the quake disrupted communications and transport links.

On the spot

The Defence Ministry said the number of soldiers and armed police already in the quake-hit areas of Sichuan was

20,000

On the way

The number of soldiers still on their way by air, road, rail and on foot to Sichuan's disaster-struck areas was

30,000

The evacuees

The number of people who had been evacuated in the province following the earthquake was

30,000

Size of relief

The amount of relief, in yuan, which had been allocated by the central government was

860m

News Digest

International



Junta snubs aid experts
Myanmar's military rulers reject growing international pressure to accept aid workers, insisting against all the evidence that they can handle the emergency cyclone relief effort alone, despite warnings from the west.
Full reports A14

Behind the News



Smog blankets Games hopes
Beijing counted its blessings when it rained on the morning of a marathon trial late last month, just in time to disperse thick smog that had blanketed the Olympics host city for the previous five days. But the shroud of smog prompted fresh pollution fears.
Full report A20

City

Villagers demand dumping action
Residents and landowners of a Tai Po village want the government to untangle an environmental blunder which saw thousands of tonnes of construction waste dumped on their land by a fleet of trucks last month, despite complaints to three government departments.
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