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Quake aftermath

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Girl pulled from rubble at epicentre asks after family; medics daren't say they're dead

'Keep talking. I'm so lonely'

Choi Chi-yuk trekked 18 hours on foot to reach the epicentre of the Sichuan (四川) earthquake, then retraced the 49km to tell his story. One of the first reporters to reach Yingxiu, he learned of the disaster which befell its people

Villagers had cleared an open space at the entrance to the flattened township for doctors to set up a field hospital. Dozens of injured lay in tents, most with bone fractures. In one corner was 10-year-old Zhou Hongmei.

The girl had been trapped as she fled her primary school. A boulder hit her and trapped her right hand. Unable to move, she was left exposed for more than a day to the wind and rain which followed Monday's devastating earthquake, until PLA soldiers came to pull her free.

"I have not seen my papa and mom. I have not seen my elder brother and elder sister either. I miss them very much," Hongmei said as doctor and nurses treated her hand.

"Can you tell me why they do not come to see me?"

The silence that followed seemed to last an eternity. A nurse smiled.

What could she say? Hongmei's parents and siblings were dead.

"When I am taken onto the plane, you must keep talking to me. I feel very lonely," the girl told the nurse.

Doctors said she may have to have her right hand amputated.

When the four-storey school collapsed in the middle of the afternoon, more than 400 pupils were buried under tonnes of debris. Fewer than half escaped with their lives.

Hongmei recalled what happened with surprising calmness.

"We were having a lesson in a second-floor classroom. Suddenly the ground shook. Our teacher shouted to us: 'Run quickly. Earthquake.'

"I was running across the playground when a big rock fell on me."

The school is a mass of rubble. Rescuers were working around the clock to pull out possible survivors. Parents crowded around.

They screamed their children's

names, the shouts echoing across the valley.

Headmaster Zhang Chundong said just 215 of the 471 pupils were known to have survived.

Eleven-year-old Zhang Chunmei was trapped under the debris for nearly three days before being pulled out. She has a serious leg injury.

"Doctors said her leg may have to be cut off," said her teacher, Tang Yongzhong.

"She is a very nice girl. I kept talking to her after she was located under the debris. She told me her hair got entangled and she wanted a comb," said Mr Tang, bursting into tears.

Yingxiu, once home to 12,000 people, has been all but flattened. Ten thousand are dead or missing. Rubble and debris carpets streets and alleys onclined with low-rise blocks.

The wails of survivors grieving for their loved ones filled the air when relief workers and this reporter arrived. We had walked for more than 18 hours from Dujiangyan (都江堰) - itself badly hit by the 7.8-magnitude quake - to reach Yingxiu in Wenchuan county, epicentre of the quake. Roads leading to the township had literally been twisted.

Desperate and destitute, survivors in the mountain settlement were camped in makeshift tents, waiting for help.

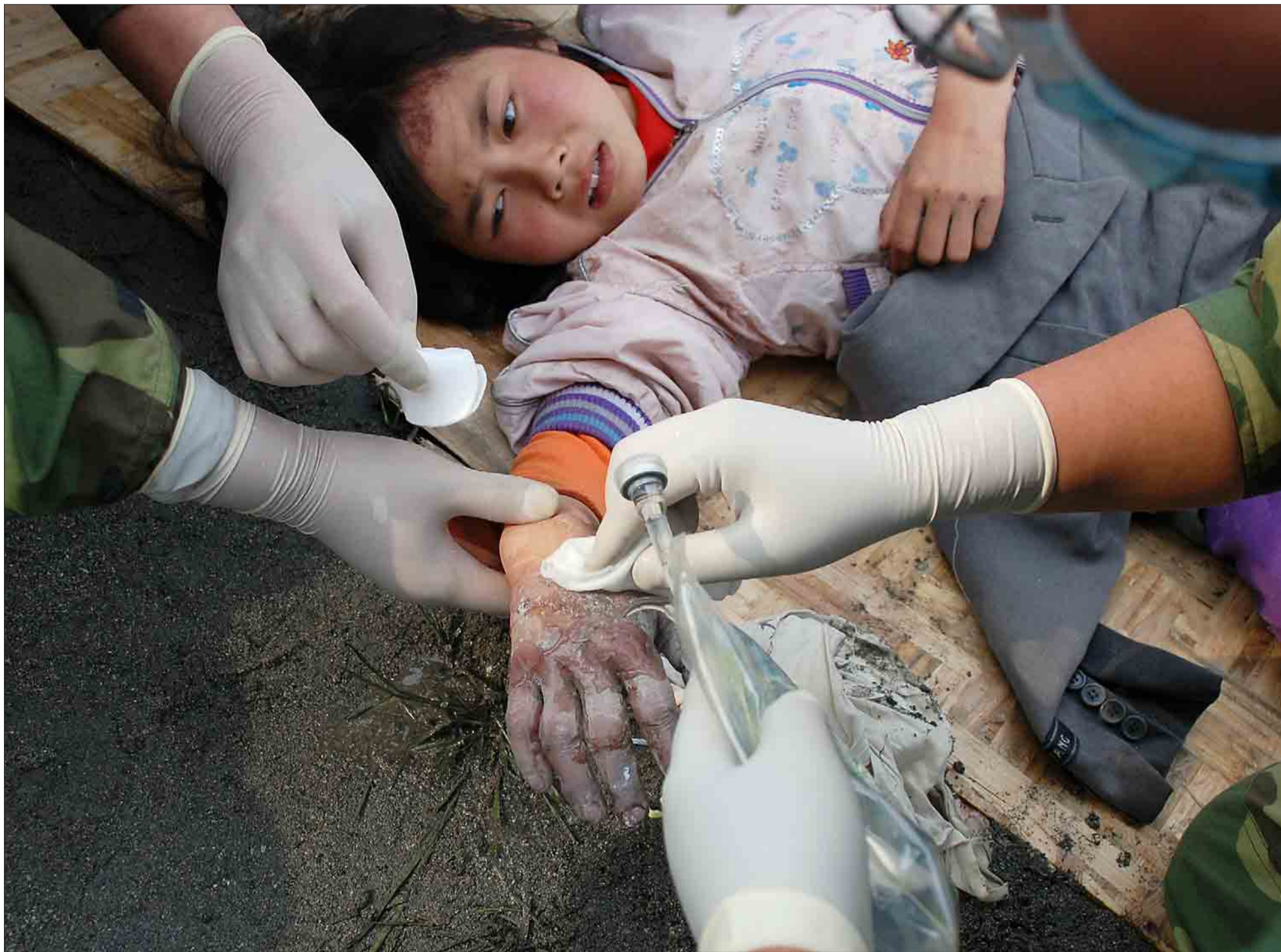
Authorities have pushed some 130,000 troops into the area struck by the quake to distribute aid and search for survivors. However, the massive relief operation had hardly touched Yingxiu until yesterday because landslides had blocked the only road to the village.

Like us, PLA soldiers had to hike to the village.

Once there, they set up a temporary pier to allow boats to transport relief supplies to the area.

Even then, Mother Nature wasn't done with Yingxiu. A strong aftershock yesterday brought down a fifth of the buildings that had survived.

"I have lost everything. My father, mother and grandfather are all gone," said a girl, collapsing at the roadside.



Zhou Hongmei looks on as medical staff see what can be done to save her right arm, trapped for more than 24 hours under the debris of her school in Yingxiu. Photo: Choi Chi-yuk

Hopes dwindle for the 25,000 still buried

Hopes for the survival of more than 25,000 people still buried by the Sichuan (四川) earthquake dimmed yesterday as Beijing counted the missing in official death toll estimates.

The State Council earthquake relief command centre confirmed the deaths of 19,509 people - up from 14,866 a day earlier - and put the expected death toll at more than 50,000.

"The large-scale search and rescue has basically finished. The focus of the next stage is medical aid," Mianzhu (绵竹) Communist Party secretary Jiang Guohua was quoted as saying.

Doctors worried about shortages of medical equipment, drugs and blood plasma.

They fear, too, that traffic jams on damaged mountain roads, aftershocks and the threat of more landslides will hamper efforts to prevent the spread of disease.

Wang Liming, a doctor from the



Despair and devastation at a collapsed school building in Wenchuan. Photo: Reuters

Mianyang Chinese Medicine Hospital, said overcrowding was creating problems at the Mianyang Jiuzhou Gymnasium, where more than 20,000 survivors were camping.

There was a risk raw sewage could contaminate food supplies, he said.

"It is so hot and so many people are here. The people wear second-hand clothes which are not very clean.

"If the situation is not better monitored, epidemic diseases could break out."

In Beichuan county, where 7,000 people have been confirmed dead, the heat was causing the corpses wrapped in plastic bags to smell and doctors were worried diseases might spread.

Vice-Minister of Health Gao Qiang (高强) said they had noticed psychological problems were starting to appear and health workers were trying to help people cope with the trauma of losing everything, including loved ones.

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake, centred in Wenchuan county in Sichuan, was felt in most mainland provinces, as well as in Hong Kong, Taiwan and as far away as Bangkok.

Aftershocks continue to shake the disaster area, with 20 tremors measuring above 5 on the Richter scale and 119 shocks stronger than 4 reported since Monday.

Ninety more helicopters were sent to the southwestern province to drop supplies and carry out the injured. PLA troops and armed police continued to arrive on foot at the dozens of towns and villages worst-hit by the quake and isolated until now because roads are blocked or destroyed.

CCTV footage showed several people rescued after being buried in rubble for three days, but the chances for other survivors are slim because the critical 72-hour survival period has passed.

In Mianzhu, PLA soldiers plucked five students from collapsed schools yesterday but they were already dead, Xinhua reported.

Mr Gao said they would never give up as long as there was at least "a glimmer of hope" and the medical teams had just begun their work, with "arduous tasks" ahead.

Jane Cai

News Digest

International

Behind Myanmar's bamboo curtain

A South China Morning Post reporter penetrates Myanmar's bamboo curtain to discover a regime in a state of heightened paranoia after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis - and relief efforts still lacking in many areas. Aid agencies again warn that the slow response and lack of outside expertise will mean more deaths. **Full report A10**

Business

Walter Kwok writ accuses brothers

Walter Kwok Ping-sheung (right) secures an injunction to delay a Sun Hung Kai Properties board meeting at which directors were to vote to remove him as chairman and chief executive. In a writ, he suggests brothers Raymond Kwok Ping-luen and Thomas Kwok Ping-kwong (left) may have misinformed a doctor in California to secure a diagnosis he is mentally ill. **Full report B1**

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