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Quake aftermath

Tales of heroism and survival
A2-3

School builders broke rules
A4

Beijing leaders tested
A5

How you can help
A5

PLA troops pour into stricken county as Wen says the injured must be saved

No houses left standing in some towns, says leader of armed police contingent

Survival hopes prevail amid the rubble

Jane Cai

Thousands of rescuers continued to pull survivors from the rubble left by the Sichuan earthquake yesterday, as relief operations got under way at the quake's epicentre.

PLA troops streamed into Wenchuan county – by foot, boat and helicopter – passing survivors, many of them carrying injured loved ones, trudging out of the devastated region.

Wenchuan was home to more than 100,000 residents before Monday's 7.8 magnitude quake struck, but rescuers fear more than half its population may have been lost.

So far, 500 deaths have been officially confirmed in the county but an estimated 60,000 people are missing.

Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) visited the county yesterday afternoon by helicopter and spoke to survivors.

"The central government will not forget this place," he assured them. "We must rescue the injured people. If the roads are still blocked, we will deploy aircraft to transport people out. This morning, we sent over 50 people out of here by helicopters."

Roads, communications and power supplies remain severed in the mountainous area that is bisected by the Min River.

Military helicopter pilots tried to drop soldiers, food and medicine into the area on Tuesday but were defeated by torrential rain.

Xinhua said the air force parachuted 15 soldiers and some materials to the area yesterday. But as the weather deteriorated, its plan to drop another 83 soldiers was cancelled.

Members of the People's Armed Police, the first to reach Wenchuan on Tuesday night, reported that casualties and housing conditions were serious and the county was in desperate need of medical supplies, food, water, quilts and tents.

"Eight towns including Yingxiu and Wolong suffered severe losses," Wang Yi, chief of staff of the armed police's 8,740-strong force in Wenchuan, told CCTV.

"There is basically no housing still standing in some towns. All the

buildings have been levelled. In the downtown area of the county, one third of the buildings collapsed and the remainder were seriously damaged. Villages in hills were razed to the ground."

The 4,084 sq km county has six large towns and seven smaller ones.

Xinhua said the situation was not as severe as expected, however. It released aerial pictures of one town showing most buildings intact, some roads damaged and landslides scarring the surrounding hills.

In Yingxiu township alone, only 2,300 out of about 10,000 people have so far been confirmed alive.

The official death toll in Sichuan rose to 14,463 as of 2pm yesterday,

Ground zero
Wenchuan county, the epicentre of China's worst quake in more than 30 years, has just begun to count the toll

The population of Wenchuan county

100,000

The number of people missing after the quake

60,000

with the Ministry of Civil Affairs putting the total toll in the eight provinces most affected by the earthquake at 14,866.

State media yesterday focused on the premier's visits to the hardest-hit areas, including Beichuan county and Shifang, Deyang and Dujiangyan cities, where he delivered condolences, comfort and encouragement.

"The party and the government are concerned about you. Your pain is our pain," CCTV showed Mr Wen



A child is pulled from the rubble yesterday in Beichuan, one of the areas worst hit by Monday's quake, raising hopes that more survivors may be found. Photo: Reuters

telling survivors being housed in Red Cross tents in Beichuan, his arms wrapped around two little girls.

Other media footage showed public anger at the rescue effort.

In Mianzhu city, the mother of a buried student lashed out at the rescue work and media coverage.

"It rained heavily yesterday. No one bothered to care about the students who are buried, not knowing if they are alive or dead. [The state media] reporters came here and reported positive news," she told Cable TV. "They said everything was good. How ugly it is!"

In Dujiangyan city, a man said: "I asked a soldier to help my wife get out of the rubble. He told me to talk to his boss. I found the officer, but he said they had to find the dead people first."

"Why don't they save the living first? I don't get it."

In Beichuan county, about 160km from the epicentre but said to be the worst-affected area, hopes began to dim of finding survivors at a six-storey school that collapsed, burying at least 1,000 middle-school students.

"When we first arrived, we could hear occasional cries for help from the ruins, but as time went by, the cries lowered to whispers and we feared the children were dying," a Xinhua reporter wrote.

Elsewhere, in a tale of hope, rescuers pulled Song Xinyi, 3, from the ruins of her house, where she had survived more than 40 hours sheltered under the bodies of her dead mother and father. She was still conscious after being pulled out and was able to tell rescuers her name and age.

Authorities said conditions for rescue work were expected to improve with no rain forecast in today and tomorrow in Sichuan, the Chengdu-Wenchuan rail line resuming operation and major roads to Wenchuan under repair.

President Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) chaired a Politburo meeting in Beijing yesterday, the second held in three days to organise relief efforts.

He called on people to be united to face up to the rigorous challenges to save lives and ensure sufficient food, water and other supplies.

News Digest

International

New Myanmar cyclone threat
The UN warns that another cyclone could be forming over Myanmar, where up to 2 million people are still awaiting food and water after Cyclone Nargis. Heavy rains have already arrived in some areas, adding to the misery of survivors of the devastating storm. **Full report A16**

City

Two jailed for beating cat to death
Two men who beat a cat to death with a wooden pole are jailed for up to four months. Sentencing driver Tse Wing-wai, 24, and technician Leung Siu-tung, 19, Principal Magistrate Garry Tallentire described the offence as serious and disturbing. Tse was given four months, and Leung was given three. **Full report C1**

City

Cakes and ail
If you don't want to load up on trans-fats – which doctors say can harm the heart and make you fat – you'd better avoid certain brands of doughnut, cake and chocolate bar. A Krispy Kreme doughnut contains more than the recommended daily maximum. **Full report C1**

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Inside

NEWS	SECTION A	BUSINESS	SECTION B	CITY-LIFE-SPORT	SECTION C
Weather	A2	Tom Holland	B2	City News	C1-4
Sichuan earthquake	A2-5	Companies & Finance	B2-4	CitySeen, Talkback	C2
Olympic Torch Relay	A6 & 9	World	B5-7	Life	C5
Hong Kong & Delta	A10	Markets	B10	Screen	C6
International	A16-19	Mutual Funds	B11	Food	C7
Leaders & Letters	A21	Currencies	B12	Diversions	C9
Insight	A21	Hong Kong Stocks	B14	TV & Radio	C10
Behind the News	A22	Monitor & Lai See	B16	Sport	C11-14

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