

Devastating Nepal earthquake kills hundreds

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By Gopal Sharma and Ross Adkin, Reuters

A powerful earthquake struck Nepal and sent tremors through northern India on Saturday, killing hundreds of people, toppling an historic 19th-century tower in the capital Kathmandu and touching off a deadly avalanche on Mount Everest.

There were reports of devastation in outlying, isolated mountainous areas after the quake struck with a magnitude of 7.9, the worst in 81 years, with its epicentre 80km east of Nepal's second largest city, Pokhara.

A collapse in communications hampered relief efforts, raising fears of a humanitarian disaster across the impoverished Himalayan nation of 28 million people.

A home ministry official told Reuters said the death toll had reached 758 in Nepal. A further 34 fatalities were reported in northern India and one in Bangladesh. The quake was shallow in depth, intensifying its destructive force.

Indian tourist Devyani Pant was in a Kathmandu coffee shop with friends when "suddenly the tables started trembling and paintings on the wall fell on the ground.

"I screamed and rushed outside," she told Reuters by telephone from the capital, where at least 181 people died.

"We are now collecting bodies and rushing the injured to the ambulance. We are being forced to pile several bodies one above the other to fit them in."

A tourism official said at least eight people were killed when an avalanche unleashed by the earthquake swept through the Everest Base Camp for climbers of the world's highest mountain.

Choti Sherpa, who works at the Everest Summiteers Association, was unable to call her family and colleagues on the mountain. "Everyone is trying to contact each other, but we can't," she said. "We are all very worried."

Tourist trail

Around 300,000 foreign tourists were estimated to be in Nepal for the spring trekking and climbing season, and officials were overwhelmed by calls from concerned friends and relatives.

"We are facing a tremendous crisis here and it is hard to even assess what the death toll and the extent of damage could be," said Mohan Krishna Sapkota, a second tourism official.

"The trekkers are scattered all around the base camp and some had even trekked further up. It is almost impossible to get in touch with anyone."

A landlocked nation sandwiched between India and China, popular with adventure tourists, Nepal has had its share of natural disasters. Its worst earthquake in 1934 killed more than 8,500 people.

Political instability weakens the ability of the government to handle a crisis - Nepal has still not upgraded its weather forecasting despite being surprised by unseasonal blizzards last autumn that killed 32 in the Annapurna massif.

In 2001, Nepal burst into global headlines when then-Crown Prince Dipendra gunned down 10 members of his family, including his father, King Birendra Shah, before killing himself.

A Maoist rebellion subsequently asserted power, transformed the kingdom into a republican democracy and abolished the monarchy altogether in 2008. Nepal, however, has yet to agree on a new constitution.

Tower toppled

The revered Dharara Tower collapsed in Kathmandu when the quake erupted shortly before noon local time. A policeman said that up to 200 people had been trapped in the structure.

Built in 1832 for the queen of Nepal, the tower was a 60-metre-high landmark that had been open to visitors for the last 10 years and had a viewing balcony.

A jagged stump just 10 metres high was all that was left of the lighthouse-like structure. Several bodies were extracted from the ruins.

At the main hospital in Kathmandu, people with broken limbs and arms were being rushed in for treatment. Crowds and volunteers formed human chains to clear the way for ambulances to bring in the injured.

Kathmandu is home to ancient, wooden Hindu temples. Photographs posted online showed buildings reduced to rubble, with large cracks along roads and residents sitting in the street holding babies.

"I can see three bodies of monks trapped in a debris of a collapsed building near a monastery," said Pant, the Indian tourist. "We are trying to pull the bodies out and look for anyone who is trapped."

Everest avalanche

The Everest avalanches, first reported by climbers, raised fears for those on the world's

loftiest peak a year after a massive snowslide caused the deadliest incident yet there.

Romanian climber Alex Gavan said on Twitter that there had been a "huge avalanche" and "many, many" people were up on the mountain. "Running for life from my tent," Gavan said. "Everest base camp huge earthquake then huge avalanche."

Another climber, Daniel Mazur, said Everest base camp had been "severely damaged" and his team was trapped.

"Please pray for everyone," he said on his Twitter page.

An avalanche in April 2014 just above the base camp on Mount Everest killed 16 Nepali guides.

The tremors on Saturday were felt as far away as New Delhi and other northern cities in India, with reports that they had lasted up to a minute.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake, initially measured at 7.7 but upgraded to 7.9 magnitude, struck 80km east of Pokhara. It was only 2km deep.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired an emergency meeting and dispatched a military air transporter with three tonnes of supplies and a 40-member disaster response team to Nepal. Three more planes were to follow later on Saturday, carrying a mobile hospital and further relief teams.

- Reuters

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