



AID WORKERS STRUGGLE TO REACH EARTHQUAKE SURVIVORS

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More than two weeks after a destructive earthquake centered in the Himalayan region of Pakistan, aid workers are struggling to shelter more than three million survivors before the harsh winter sets in.

Officials estimate that at least 50,000 people were killed and more than 75,000 injured when the earthquake struck the mountainous area in South Asia Oct. 8.

Now, officials fear a second wave of deaths if the survivors, many with no place to go, do not receive immediate shelter.

“It’s the most difficult humanitarian crisis ever,” Andrew MacLeod, chief operations officer for the United Nations, told the New York Times. “because the scale is huge, the logistics are so difficult and there’s such a brutal winter coming on.”

Treacherous terrain

Many survivors are isolated in small hillside villages with few roads. Aid workers are dependent on slow moving mules to send food and medicine to many of the more remote locations.

Although there are relief camps in low land areas, many are too weak or injured to make their way down the mountains.

“You’ve got Darwin’s fittest coming down and moving into tents,” Unicef spokeswoman Katey Grusovin told the New York Times. “But you’ve got children, you’ve got elderly still remaining very high up.”

Helicopters, which are in short supply, are often the only way to quickly reach those affected. Only 60 are operating in the region now. Pakistan’s neighbor -- and longtime regional rival -- India has offered to supply helicopters but Pakistan will not accept Indian pilots.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over the disputed Kashmir region, one of the hardest hit areas.

Kashmir history

Just over fifty years ago, India and Pakistan were part of the same British colony -- similar to what the U.S. was before the revolution.

For 200 years, British rule kept conflicts between the two dominant religious communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, at bay. But when Britain granted the colony its freedom in 1947, it decided to split the territory into two parts -- India and Pakistan.

Although the official transfer of power went smoothly, the partition itself -- into predominantly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan -- pushed 10 million people out of their homes.

Some estimates put the number slaughtered in the hideous fighting that broke out in both countries at as many as a million. Many Muslims rushed out of Hindu dominated India and Hindus fled from Pakistan .

Kashmir, located in the northern area along the border of the two countries, was ruled by a Hindu maharajah. It was up to him to decide which new country his state would join. In 1947, he chose India despite the fact that most people who lived there were Muslim.

Fighting between the Hindu ruling class and the Pakistani-backed Muslim majority followed his decision. A year later, the UN stepped in and negotiated a cease-fire, but the tension remained. Another war broke out in 1965.

Kashmir is today divided between the Pakistani area of Kashmir and the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir. But Muslims have continued to protest violently, carrying out bombings and other attacks against police, officials and civilians. And human rights groups have criticized the Indian troops in Kashmir for torture, rape, and killing.

Estimates of deaths since the fighting began range from 30,000 to 50,000.

Besides the fact that Kashmir has a Muslim majority, Pakistan is fighting for control of several rivers, which are important in the irrigation of the plains of Pakistan.

Many fear that the dispute could escalate into a regional atomic war, as both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons.

International aid

With winter looming experts are saying there is limited time to save lives.

“There are three to four weeks of window available to us” to provide shelter to survivors, General Farooq Ahmed, the chairman of Pakistan's Federal Relief Commission, told reporters in Islamabad yesterday.

Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has called upon world leaders to increase the amount of aid for the quake region. Of the \$312 million sought by the U.N., only \$43 million had been given and \$43 million pledged, according to Annan.

But some aid experts fear that the many large-scale natural disasters in the past year, from the Asian tsunami to Hurricane Katrina in the United States, have slowed aid.

“I think perhaps it's just too many disasters, one following the other, but, you know, one doesn't control nature. These things happen,” Iqbal Noor Ali, chief executive officer of the Aga Khan Foundation USA, told the NewsHour.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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