



PHOTO: AFP

Earthquake victims rush to a military helicopter for evacuation from Chakoti border town of the Pakistan-controlled Kashmir region yesterday, five days after a powerful earthquake shattered the region. Hope was running out for finding more survivors of Pakistan's massive earthquake, which left around 2.5 million people left homeless and killed 25,000, even though vast isolated stretches of the lower Himalayas remain cut off, officials said.

Troops relieve cut-off Indian villages

PM seeks quake aid for both sides of Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

Indian foot soldiers yesterday reached 10 villages which had been cut off for five days as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appealed for money to aid both parts of divided Kashmir and Pakistan.

"Our army patrols have reached every single village and we have 35 medical teams deployed in the proximity of these areas," Lieutenant General S.S. Dhillon, army commander in Indian Kashmir, told reporters.

Dhillon said food, medicines and tents would soon reach the 10 stricken villages which has an estimated population of 9,000. He had no

details about the number of dead and wounded in the mountain outposts.

In New Delhi, Singh urged Indians to be generous.

"People across the Indian subcontinent have felt the pain and anguish of those who have lost their loved ones and their livelihoods in the earthquake that ravaged Kashmir on both sides of the Line of Control (de facto border) and parts of Pakistan," Singh said, quoted by his media advisor Sanjaya Baru.

"Neither nature's fury nor human compassion recognise political boundaries. It is in our culture to help one's own and one's neighbours in an hour of need," the premier said.

He noted India had already sent Tuesday a plane load of relief supplies to Pakistan, where the death toll has risen to 25,000.

Another 82 tons of aid was to leave by train for Pakistan on Thursday night, the foreign ministry said.

On Tuesday, the prime minister pledged almost 150 million dollars to help rebuild Indian Kashmir where 1,329 died and 5,000 were injured.

"I am sure Indian civil society will step forward and contribute to the relief and rehabilitation effort. I appeal to every concerned citizen of our Republic to donate generously ... to help us help those in need," Singh said.

PAK SURVIVORS SAY

Aid arrives too late

REUTERS, Balakot

The Pakistani army has arrived, relief goods are coming in, and the injured are getting medical attention now.

But for surviving residents of Balakot in northern Pakistan, all this has come too late after Saturday's devastating earthquake left them homeless and traumatised.

Most have already left to find shelter with relatives and friends in safer areas, including nearby Mansehra and Abbottabad.

For those who remain, scars left by the disaster that flattened or damaged most homes, shops, schools and restaurants are so deep survivor Shaheena Pervaz, 45, has not been able to get a good night's sleep since.

"We are still very scared and panicky wondering what will happen if it comes again. We are worried about our future," said Pervaz as she sat in a corner of a tent in which 10 of her relatives slept with just a candle to keep the darkness away. Shaheena was not the only survivor

to stay awake on Wednesday night in what was once a bustling township.

By day, Balakot is a picture of activity. Aid workers and volunteers distribute food, blankets and medical supplies and the army and foreign relief agencies clear the rubble of houses and shops with heavy machinery.

At night, the town at the foot of the imposing Karakoram mountain range presents an eerie picture. Torchlight reveals narrow lanes winding through the remains of concrete houses.

Survivors fend for themselves under a starry sky and half moon with no power, little warm clothing and only dry food.

Schoolteacher Akhar Zaman sat with two of his brothers and two friends keeping themselves warm around a makeshift fireplace. He said they had no place to sleep due to a shortage of tents.

"On average, there are about two to three families with 10 to 15 persons sharing one tent -- most of them chil-

dren or women. So we have to make sacrifices to see they get proper sleep."

Zaman, wrapped in a blanket to keep himself warm against the chilly night, lost two sons, as did his brother Arshad, after hundreds of children were crushed to death in collapsed schools.

"The biggest problem we are facing is of toilets," he said. "Our houses are destroyed and we have to use the open space. It gets very difficult and embarrassing for us, especially the women. We would ask the government and relief agencies to first resolve this problem for us."

Arshad Pervaz managed to recover blankets, warm clothing and a gas stove from the remains of his house. He said the only people staying in Balakot were those with other places to go.

Despite the exodus and the aid now coming in, tents and food are in short supply.

Gohar Rehman, 50 and crippled, said 20 members of his family were sharing two tents -- one borrowed from

a friend and the other provided by a relief agency.

"On average, two or three families are sharing one tent, blankets and food. There is still a lot to be done in this place," he said.

Rehman said just surviving was a sign from God that he must go on and look after his family.

Rehman and his wife found a 16-month-old boy in the concrete remains of a house and have adopted him. They see him as a symbol and hope for a better new life and have named him "Hamza" after the uncle of the Prophet Mohammad.

Meanwhile, thousands of people are pouring out of Muzaffarabad following the earthquake, escaping a ruined city without electricity, sanitation and adequate supplies of food, water and fuel.

No end to the pain at makeshift hospital

AFP, Muzaffarabad

In a tiny makeshift clinic set up in a stadium, earthquake survivors scream with pain and silent children pass for dead, but either way the flow of wounded never stops.

There are never enough doctors to care for the grim parade of patients. Medical workers treat the survivors frantically, on the ground or two to a table, with few supplies at hand after Pakistan's worst disaster on record.

Many survivors have lost their entire families and arrive expressionless after the shock of Saturday's tragedy that has claimed at least 23,000 lives.

Every five minutes a patient comes in or out of the cramped emergency room of Neelum Stadium, where under a stench of iodine the injured lie on cloth stretchers or on dirty and drenched coverings spread on the ground.

The anaesthesia available is rarely strong enough.

Sumera, 13, cries out as a doctor dresses her foot injury. Next to her another young girl wrenches her hand into the air when a surgical knife touches the gaping wound on her head. On the ground a young woman shrieks in agony as she is treated for a fractured bone.

Military and civilian doctors run around, worn out, some unshaven, and many going without food or water during the day for the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

"We're simply swamped. There's enough medicine for basic treatment but not enough supplies or doctors," says medical surgeon Sohail Muzammil.

"There are only three operating tables -- sometimes we put two children on the same table, the others are treated on the ground. There are too many wounded," he says.

S Asian quake more devastating than tsunami: WHO

AFP, Islamabad

South Asia's earthquake was more devastating than last year's Indian Ocean tsunami in terms of the number of homeless and destruction to infrastructure, a UN official said yesterday.

Hussein Gezairy, who heads the World Health Organisation's Cairo-based regional office that covers Pakistan, said it would be "much, much more difficult" to reach quake victims in the Himalayas than the tsunami survivors.

"The devastation is much bigger than the tsunami and much bigger definitely than what happened in the United States with Katrina hurricane," Gezairy told reporters in Islamabad.

"In the tsunami 1.5 million people were made homeless, but in this case we expect more than 2.5 million to be homeless," he said.

"For the 1.5 million people who were homeless something like 10 billion dollars were mobilised. I do not

expect this to be happening in Pakistan, but I hope that people will give much more," he said.

The death toll was far higher in the tsunami. Some 217,000 people were killed when giant waves battered 11 Indian Ocean countries on December 26.

Saturday's earthquake has killed more than 25,000 people in Pakistan and 1,300 in India.

Gezairy said it would be far more difficult to reach earthquake victims still cut off in the mountains.

"The tsunami was all along the coasts, no roads or bridges were destroyed and the damage was a few hundred meters inside," he said.

"During the tsunami it was possible to have some ships and in this case only helicopters can reach the disaster areas, but they cannot transport a large number people and equipment. It is much, much more difficult than the tsunami."

Villagers on desperate march to Pak city

AFP, Balakot

Desperate villagers whose communities were razed to the ground by Pakistan's massive earthquake were pouring into this city yesterday to find only more devastation.

Hundreds if not thousands of villagers -- the exact number impossible to verify -- have descended from the mountains since Saturday's disaster to Balakot, formerly a city of 40,000 people but now reduced to a sea of tents.

Fatima, a widow of around 50 years old, decided to make the two-hour walk to town with her four daughters and two sons aged between five and 16 after her village of Pamara was wiped out.

But here she has waited for five days under a blazing sun by day and in a damp cold at night and still doesn't have what she needs to live.

"We got a bit of food, some fruit juice and biscuits. But what we really need is shelter -- a tent -- to survive," she said.

Fatima, who uses her purple shawl to keep her entire family warm when they sleep, thought her chance had come when she approached trucks carrying aid.

"But there was a mad rush. I was pushed and shoved," she said.

Wali Rehman had initially decided to stay in his village of Sanghar outside Balakot. For three days, the 60-year-old waited with what was left of his family and buried his brother and nephew.

"We stayed there without eating but nothing arrived," he said.

Finally he decided to take the road, leaving behind his village where victims lie with broken arms and legs.

Balakot in North West Frontier Province was one of the towns worst hit by the 7.6-magnitude quake. More than 25,000 people have died and 2.5 million are homeless across Pakistan, according to officials.

While the situation is dire in Balakot, far away in the mountains many villages remain completely cut off.

UN relief chief Jan Egeland, speaking to AFP after a helicopter tour Thursday of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, said it remained "so hard" to reach people outside major cities as trails and mountain roads have been destroyed in hundreds of places. "No search team came to our village. Most people have fled and there are only the injured left. Nothing came by helicopter either," said Zaman, 28, who said he came from "the other side of the mountain" in the village of Bahngia.

Pak doctors overwhelmed by quake victims

AP, Balakot

Inside the makeshift tent hospital in Balakot, crushed limbs hang limply from children's bodies, badly injured people lie on cots soaked with blood and buzzing with flies, and a little girl has a gaping wound in her skull.

Quake victims arrive faster than doctors can treat them, many carried in on the backs of relatives from surrounding villages that rescue workers have not reached yet because landslides have wiped out roads.

US and Pakistani helicopters worked tirelessly Thursday to bring in supplies and evacuate the wounded but could not keep up with the demand.

"The helicopters keep bringing in more supplies so the medical supplies are fairly adequate, but we need more evacuation," said Dr. Uzer Khan. "At least we need the opening up of the roads so that doctors can take supplies to the villages that have not yet been reached and treat people there."

Khan, 22, who just graduated from medical school in Islamabad, headed to Balakot with five friends from the university when he heard of the need for doctors here. The town, 60 miles north of the capital, was devastated by Saturday's 7.6-magnitude earthquake. Many of the dead are children whose schools collapsed on them.

Quake helps build Indo-Pak 'trust bridge'

REUTERS, Uri

The road between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir may have been closed by landslides and the Peace Bridge connecting the two sides across a Himalayan stream badly damaged by Saturday's earthquake.

But slowly and cautiously, another bridge is being built -- between the traditionally hostile armies of India and Pakistan.

Indian army officers said that a small group of Indian soldiers crossed the frontline, first on Tuesday and again on Wednesday, at the invitation of their Pakistani counterparts, close to the damaged Peace Bridge.

Their mission -- to help the Pakistani soldiers repair a bunker they would once have shot at or shelled.

"It was spontaneous help," Brigadier D.S. Hooda of the Indian army told Reuters on Thursday. "A disaster like this can certainly help improve relations between the two sides."

But Pakistan, which has been sensitive about accepting Indian help in the aftermath of the disaster, denied the incident as it became the focus of the world media.

"Let me say on record that this is totally fabricated," said Pakistani military spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan.



PHOTO: AFP

Five-year-old girl Larif Hussein is taken for medical treatments after she crawled free from a crumpled building as desperate locals, who did not know she was there, dug for survivors, in Muzaffarabad, Wednesday, four days after a powerful earthquake shocked the region.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani woman begs for relief goods in the earthquake-hit remote area of Balakot, in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, yesterday. Hope to find whatever survivors from the October 8 earthquake has faded, with the 25,000 death toll expected to rise with the removal of more corpses from the debris.