

Kashmiris fear icy death as winter looms

REUTERS, AP, Maserul Islamabad

Thousands of children in regions devastated by South Asia's earthquake are at risk of death from cold, malnutrition and disease, Unicef said.

The UN agency said the international relief effort must focus on keeping children alive in the weeks ahead. It said it was sending high protein biscuits, boots and sweaters for children, blankets, water containers, plastic tarpaulins, tents, medical supplies and blankets to affected areas.

"With wintry conditions arriving in the higher elevations, children are facing a potentially deadly combination of cold, malnutrition, and disease," Unicef Executive Director Ann Veneman said in a statement from New York on Thursday.

"Most housing has been destroyed in the hardest-hit areas, so the survival

of thousands of young children is now at stake," Veneman said.

Routine immunisation coverage in the quake zone is about 60 per cent for young children, so hundreds of thousands are unprotected against deadly diseases such as measles, Unicef said. It said it was sending Vitamin A to the region to boost immune systems of children, who are more vulnerable to measles if weakened by exposure and malnutrition.

Indian Kashmiri villager Rajbibi says it was a miracle that she survived last week's deadly earthquake that struck the mountainous regions of northern Pakistan and India and killed tens of thousands.

The 60-year-old woman fears she may not be as lucky when temperatures dip to freezing levels during the fast-approaching winter. But she says death is beginning to look welcoming.

"I'd rather die than live like this,"

said Rajbibi, lying on pine branches under a plastic sheet held up by wooden sticks. The makeshift tent was beside a highway, exposed to a chill in the air, which heralds winter in the Himalayan region.

There were about a dozen such tents on the pine tree-covered mountainside, sheltering victims from isolated and devastated communities.

Most of them hope to get over the disaster and rebuild their ravaged lives. But before they are able to do that, they need shelters that will protect them from the harsh winter.

The problem is much more acute in northern Pakistan, which bore the brunt of Saturday's earthquake and where an estimated one million people have lost their homes.

But officials in the Karnah region of Indian Kashmir, close to the frontier, say there are tens of thousands of homeless on this side of the border too

who are seriously under threat if they are not given alternative housing or thick tarpaulin tents.

Snowfall has already started on the upper reaches and villages are expected to be covered by snow by early November.

Many survivors complained that neither had they got tents nor have they been promised alternative housing.

"Tents are more valuable than gold," said Mansoor Ahmed, 22, a student in Dildar village, where hundreds are living under plastic sheets and improvised tin sheds.

Residents are already reporting colds, coughs and fear an outbreak of pneumonia soon.

"We will die if we don't get tents but we have got nothing," said Askiya Begum, 45, holding her young nephew near her shelter built of wooden planks, tin and plastic sheets.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani earthquake victims fight for relief goods during the distribution of aid items at Balakot in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province yesterday. The 7.6-magnitude quake, which struck Pakistan-controlled Kashmir on October 8, killed more than 25,000 people and has left some 2.5 million people homeless.

The failed rescue of 'Emma'

AFP, Muzaffarabad

They had nicknamed her Emma. Found miraculously alive under the rubble Wednesday, rescue workers toiled delicately for hours to pull her out. But an after-shock made the team leave and when they returned for one more effort Thursday morning, Emma was dead.

The Turkish and British rescue workers in Muzaffarabad, the earthquake-ravaged capital of Pakistani Kashmir, run the series of events over and over again in their heads.

Distraught, they wrestle with questions about guilt, duty and danger and wonder what they could have done differently.

But, they repeat to themselves, they had no choice. At 1:24 am Thursday, a new earthquake of 5.6 on the Richter scale left the collapsed house too dangerous to work on.



PHOTO: AFP
An injured Kashmiri girl Ramila Niaz (R) weeps in an army helicopter as she looks at her collapsed house in Ziarat, 25 km southeast of Muzaffarabad yesterday.

Aftershock rattles Pak quake survivors

REUTERS, Muzaffarabad

Survivors of the Kashmir earthquake spent a sixth night in the open in the worst-hit city of Muzaffarabad, kept awake by the rumble of aid trucks and an aftershock early on Friday that set dogs howling.

The aftershock, at around 2 a.m. (1700 EDT), measured 5.3 magnitude on the US Geological Survey's sensors. Local meteorological officials said there were 70 aftershocks in a 24-hour period between Wednesday and Thursday, and the seismic activity was likely to continue for months and maybe years.

People who had been sleeping on the pavement in the Pakistani Kashmir capital leapt to the middle of the road, eyeing what was left of buildings warily before eventually drifting back.

The aftershocks added to the misery of an estimated 3.3 million people affected by the quake, more

than a million of them without homes and in desperate need of food and water but also tents and mobile latrines. The approach of winter was a worry.

"This is a very major earthquake but it's really aggravated a thousand times by the topography. An earthquake is bad anywhere, in the Himalayas it becomes much worse," the UN's top emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland told Reuters in an interview.

"So it's a nightmare in trying to reach now, community after community which are homeless, roofless, without food, without water. It is this race against time I fear we are now losing for many of these outlying villages.

The official death toll of 25,000 in Pakistani Kashmir is expected to rise. Some local officials and politicians say deaths could exceed 40,000. Another 1,200 died in Indian Kashmir.

The army has been airdropping

supplies to villages cut off from help in remote valleys of the Himalayan foothills of Pakistani Kashmir and North West Frontier Province.

Where valleys were too narrow and steep-sided for helicopters to fly, mule-trains are being sent to carry in the food, blankets and tents people will need to survive.

But for the villagers, mules and airdrops were a temporary and unsatisfactory step -- they were looking for assurances they were not going to be cut off for the winter.

Abdul Hamid, a district elder who walked four days and nights to reach Muzaffarabad from the village of Sardari in the Neelum valley, said the destruction was in fact not too severe but food and supplies were running out.

"We are very worried about how we can come in and out through the winter. The snows are on the mountain already and if we are cut off, thousands will die for sure," he said.

Race against time to reach survivors

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Struggling with blocked roads and a shortage of helicopters, rescuers in quake-hit Pakistan were yesterday in a race against time to reach devastated mountain villages which face being cut off as winter closes in.

The United Nations' top emergency aid official Jan Egeland said after touring the disaster zone that the devastation wrought by Saturday's monster quake was "beyond belief".

Egeland said authorities faced a nightmare scenario in one of the world's most rugged areas, with many of the roads destroyed and not enough helicopters to reach the millions left hungry and without shelter.

"We're still racing against the clock and we need to get more helicopters, more water, more tents and more money," he said.

"This is a desperate situation. As you can see we are making progress in the more populated areas but it is so hard to reach the others."

Pakistan's disaster response chief also issued a grim warning that many desperate survivors would not receive any help before bitter weather closes in on the Himalayas and snow and ice forces deliveries to a halt.

"It is not possible to provide shelter to all the affected people before the winter approaches," said Major General Farooq Javed, adding that despite the outpouring of aid from some 30 countries there was still a dire need for more blankets and tents.

Javed said it would take "many years to say the least" to rebuild northeast Pakistan where entire towns and villages were obliterated by the quake which killed at least 25,000 in Pakistan and over 1,300 in India.

As donated helicopters begin operating in the quake zone and troops clear landslides blocking the mountain passes, aid is beginning to arrive in wrecked cities like Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir.

Little signs of life in quake-hit wasteland

AP, Muzaffarabad

Four trading stores back in business, an applecart on a street corner, two auto-rickshaws playing their trade and a roadside stall serving hot tea -- small but important signs of life in a city turned into a wasteland by a powerful earthquake.

However, it took six days before anyone was brave enough to sit in a building long enough to do any trading.

The 7.6-magnitude earthquake that reduced much of Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, to rubble on Saturday also struck a deep terror of buildings into the hearts of those who survived.

But no sooner had one hardy trader opened his doors Thursday in the business area near the army stadium than others followed suit.

Not that their shops are brimming with any fresh goods -- mostly it's cold drinks, biscuits and crisps with

some toiletries and cakes providing variation.

But when they opened their doors on Thursday, word quickly spread and locals and expatriate relief workers alike made a beeline for their stores.

After five surreal days -- when the streets were lined with bodies, survivors were scrabbling with their bare hands to try to rescue those trapped, the air was filled with the sound of wailing and quake dust and the world looked as if it was ending -- the simple act of being able to walk into a store and buy a packet of biscuits can seem like a luxury.

And in a world where survivors punch and throttle each other for the food being thrown by relief workers from the tops of trucks, sipping a cup of chai (tea) at a roadside dhaba, or stall, can, perhaps, be one of life's sweetest experiences.

Alif Jan, owner of the newly-reopened "Afghan dhaba" which also serves up a hot plate of spicy rice, says he can't keep pace with demand.

"I cook, I finish, I cook, I finish, I am going crazy feeding them," he said as a group of 10 men arrived at demanding chai and spicy rice.

Not that there is anything vaguely normal in Muzaffarabad -- it's still on the edge of madness.

Most survivors walking the streets wear face masks -- the smell of death still overpowers -- houses are either tilting dangerously or have collapsed completely; everyone sleeps outside in the bitter cold; helicopters bringing in relief aid or evacuating the wounded buzz incessantly; tent towns are springing up amid the rubble and truckloads of people leave the city by the minute for safer ground.

'India, Pakistan put politics before relief'

REUTERS, Srinagar

India and Pakistan are playing politics with earthquake relief, and have missed a great opportunity to build closer ties in a time of tragedy, Kashmir's main moderate separatist leader said on Friday.

India's tepid response to the tragedy has also reinforced a sense of alienation among many ordinary Kashmiris living on its side of the divided Himalayan territory, said Mirwaiz Hurriyat Conference.

"We thought both countries should have risen beyond politics, but the only thing we see is them involved in scoring brownie points off each other," said the 34-year-old, who is also the religious leader of Sunni Muslims in Kashmir.

"It was an opportunity for India and Pakistan to really bridge the gap, to come closer to each other at this hour of crisis," he told Reuters in an interview.

"But I feel it has widened the gap." Tens of thousands of Kashmiris

died in last weekend's earthquake, most on the Pakistani side of the heavily militarised frontline. Many more are still sleeping out in the open, and fears for them are rising as temperatures drop.

India has tried to score a propaganda victory by proposing relief operations across the frontline -- an offer Pakistan spurned -- and by sending aid to Islamabad, Kashmiris say.

But it has not allowed Kashmiris on its side of the frontline to telephone the other side to find out about relatives there.

The neighbours even got involved in a row on Thursday about whether Indian soldiers had crossed the frontline to help their Pakistani counterparts rebuild a bunker.

"Repeatedly we had asked the Indian government to at least open telephone links between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, but that has fallen on deaf ears," Farooq said. "This only adds to the agony."



PHOTO: AFP
French President Jacques Chirac welcomes US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yesterday at the Elysee Palace in Paris, before talks that put focus on the Middle East and Iran's nuclear programme.

US, France warn Iran over nukes

AFP, Paris

The United States and France yesterday urged Iran to resume negotiations on its nuclear activities, and reaffirmed a threat to bring Tehran before the UN Security Council over the issue.

"We have to have a very strong message that of course there is always the course of negotiation ... but there is also the course of the Security Council," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said after talks in Paris.

"It is a course that is available to the international community and it is therefore important that Iran negotiate in good faith," she said.

A spokesman for French President Jacques Chirac said that he and Rice agreed that "the perspective of an Iran in possession of nuclear weapons is unacceptable."

But Chirac said that "it is necessary to continue the way of dialogue started by Germany, Britain and France in close concertation with Russia, in complete openness with the US, and with full respect by Iran of the Paris Accord" of November 2004, the spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP
Members of Russian special armed forces storm a shop in the southern city of Nalchik yesterday, where gunmen were holed-up following a deadly rampage the previous day. Russian security forces Friday stormed a police station and a shop where gunmen were hiding following a deadly rampage in the southern city of Nalchik, killing 10 rebels and freeing at least five hostages.

Russian forces storm bldgs to free hostages

100 people killed

AFP, Nalchik

Russian special forces stormed two buildings held by pro-Chechen gunmen yesterday, bringing to an end a massive raid by the militants in the southern city of Nalchik in which up to 100 people may have died, officials said.

"All the embers of militant resistance have been put out and all the hostages have been released," Interfax news agency quoted Gennady Gubin, prime minister of the southern Kabardino-Balkaria province, as saying.

A heavily-armed group was intercepted and killed by security forces around the suburb of Chegem in the latest attempt by militants to break out of an encirclement of the city, ITAR-TASS news agency reported.

Troops used grenades and automatic weapons Friday morning in an

assault on a local police station where gunmen had barricaded themselves in and taken hostages.

Russian Deputy Prosecutor General Vladimir Kolesnikov said after the operation that the troops had killed eight gunmen and freed five hostages, Interfax news agency said.

In a separate assault on a souvenir shop where other gunmen were hiding, militants returned fire and an AFP journalist on the scene saw one soldier shot in the leg, with RIA-Novosti reporting two militants killed.

The operations Friday came a day after scores of armed militants -- estimates placed the number at between 100 and 300 -- launched simultaneous attacks on government installations in Nalchik, triggering fierce street battles that left dozens dead.

RIA-Novosti said 24 law enforcement personnel died in the violence,

while the interior ministry said 61 gunmen had been killed. Several reports also spoke of 12 local civilians killed, but none of the figures could immediately be verified independently.

Thursday's commando-style operation targeted police stations, ministerial and security offices and a private armoury in the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria.

The province is one of seven Caucasus republics belonging to the Russian Federation, Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia being among the others.

A website frequently used by Chechen rebels, Kavkazcentre, said Thursday's attack was carried out by a unit of the local detachment of the armed Chechen rebel forces, which it identified as the "Yarmuk Jamat of Kabardino-Balkaria."

Saudi king vows to eliminate al-Qaeda

AFP, Washington

Saudi King Abdullah vowed in his first television interview as monarch to eliminate al-Qaeda even if the battle took decades to win, condemning the terror network as "the work of the devil".

Abdullah also told US channel ABC in an interview due to be broadcast later Friday that Riyadh would work to bring down oil prices whose rise he admitted had helped Saudi Arabia while damaging other countries.

The new king, who took over from late half-brother Fahd in April, insisted Saudi Arabia was doing all it could to halt terror following the September 11 attacks on the United States, in which most of the hijackers were Saudis.

He said Saudi would "fight the terrorists and those who support them or condone their actions for 10, 20 or 30 years if we have to, until we eliminate this scourge".

Abdullah, seen by some observers as a relative moderate in the Saudi ruling family, unequivocally con-

demned al-Qaeda, led by the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden.

"Madness and evil, it is the work of the devil," he said.

According to official Saudi figures, at least 90 civilians, 47 security personnel and 121 militants have died in unrest linked to Islamic militants in Saudi Arabia and an ensuing crack-down on terror by the authorities.

The monarch also defended Saudi Arabia's oil policy. Abdullah said Saudi Arabia was now producing 10 million barrels a day to meet increasing demand on oil markets and bring down prices.

"Without a doubt we have benefited financially, but we believe that the damage to other countries is tremendous and we don't believe that the prices should be at these levels," the king said.

On the regional front, echoing statements by other Saudi officials, Abdullah said that Iran was a "friendly country" and at the same time expressed concern about the Shiite country's role in Iraq.