

## NATURAL DISASTERS

# Mounting anger over Nepali government's disaster management

As relief teams struggle to reach remote villages in quake-hit Nepal, anger and frustration at the slow pace of aid delivery are growing in the Himalayan nation, with some using the discontent to score political points.



"The government's response was late. After learning that remote villages had received no government assistance for days, people in Nepal started to get increasingly angry."

These are words of journalist and Kathmandu-resident Shiwani Neupane speaking to DW about the reasons behind the growing public discontent in Nepal over the government's handling of relief efforts some 10 days after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck an area between the densely populated Nepali capital, Kathmandu, and the city of Pokhar on April 25.

The massive quake - the worst to hit the landlocked South Asian nation in more than 80 years - killed more than 7,200 people and wounded over 14,300, according to government figures. The death toll is likely to jump once relief teams reach mountain villages flattened near the epicenter.

The UN estimates eight million people - nearly a third of Nepal's population - may have been affected by the earthquake across 39 of the country's 75 districts, with at least two million people needing tents, water, food and medicines over the next three months.



The earthquake was the worst to hit Nepal in more than 80 years

"We are still having problems getting things to people in very remote areas," Orla Fagan, a spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), told DW. "There is no physical land access to these areas in most cases and we are therefore looking at a wider array of alternative ways to get supplies to people in the most remote areas."

Many mountain roads remain blocked by landslides, so helicopters and aircraft are particularly needed to reach those in remote

mountain villages. In this context, the UN welcomed the fact that a US Air Force C-17 aircraft and four tilt-rotor Ospreys landed in Kathmandu.

"They offer us the opportunity to drop off aid relief at pre-determined points. We know there are currently 14 highly-affected districts facing these limitations," Fagan said, adding that she hopes aid can reach all areas before the end of the week.

## Growing frustration

In the meantime, homeless and bereaved survivors of the disaster are growing increasingly angry and frustrated over the pace of the rescue. They accuse the government of being too slow to distribute the international aid that has flooded into the country and of leaving them stranded in remote areas waiting in desperate need of temporary shelters against the rain and cold.

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"Fear and anger is also being directed towards the government due to perceived corruption in the distribution of aid," said journalist Neupane.

As a result, there have been a handful of protests outside government offices and transport facilities in the Kathmandu Valley since the earthquake. Alison Evans, senior Asia analyst at IHS, pointed out that these protests have involved some demonstrators throwing stones and fighting with security forces, with both sides using sticks against individuals. Protesters have also blocked roads and damaged vehicles with sticks and stones.

"So far, these incidents have involved the blocking of traffic and theft of goods. However, if aid fails to reach the affected areas swiftly and its distribution continues to be unfair, this can increase the probability of violence," Evans told DW.

According to George Varughese, Nepal country representative for The Asia Foundation, this level of anger is justified from the victims' perspective for a number of reasons. "Many have seen or heard their loved ones die for want of timely rescue and treatment. Others remain hungry in far-flung areas and are at risk. Information is simply not flowing to and from affected areas," Varughese told DW.

The Kathmandu resident argues the government is being viewed as unhelpful because of its tendency to issue bureaucratic edicts about who may help and how - in the name of coordination and

transparency - rather than being viewed as a kinetic facilitator and force multiplier of all relief providers.

"We are seeing that the Nepali government has a couple of bottlenecks in terms of delivering aid. They have neither a useful fast-track system for importing relief materials nor a useful system for receiving and warehousing relief materials," he told DW. As a result, relief materials are piled up in transit airports or border crossings.

## Distribution problems

In fact, Nepal recently faced criticism for holding up foreign relief deliveries at customs, with reports of aid trucks being turned away at the border with India because they did not have the correct documentation. Then there are problems in terms of distributing relief materials once they are in the country. In most remote areas, only helicopters are effective and Nepal has very few of them.

But in order to fully comprehend the government's ability to respond, one also needs to take into account the country's political and economic situation. With a total annual GDP of \$20 billion last year, and an annual per capita GDP of only \$1,000, Nepal has an extremely limited capacity to fund disaster relief and long-term reconstruction efforts.

And then there is the issue of political instability which has affected the country in recent years. In

2008, more than a decade after it started, a communist insurgency led to the overthrow of the monarchy. Since then, the nation has faced a political paralysis as the main political parties have failed to agree on a constitution, triggering civil unrest across the country and affecting Nepal's disaster preparedness.

"In 2008, Nepal finalized its National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management, but the fractured political situation since then has prevented substantial progress towards implementation of, for example, more rigorous governance of building practices or wide-spread public awareness activities," said Evans.

### 'A matter of great shame'

Nevertheless, given the growing level of public discontent, opposition parties appear keen on capitalizing on the crisis by attacking the government of Prime Minister Sushil Koirala. Last week, Dinanath Sharma, a spokesman for Nepal's Maoists, was quoted by *the Wall Street Journal* as saying that Koirala had acted too slowly and was "showing an insensitive attitude at this time of great national loss."

Sharma added that the fact that Nepal was relying on relief assistance from India, China, the US and other countries instead of being able to take care of itself "is a matter of great shame."

Siegfried O. Wolf, a director of research at Brussels-based South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), believes that given the magnitude of the disaster and the slow pace of the government-led relief efforts, there is a chance that the Maoists could capitalize on the crisis and stage a major comeback, at least politically.

"We should keep in mind that the epicenter of the recent earthquake was in the country's northwest, not too far from the capital Kathmandu - an area in which the Maoist movement has enjoyed a significant support base for the past two decades. In this context, it is worrisome that this part of Nepal still feels neglected by the central government," Wolf told DW.

### Political implications

However, Varughese points out that the opposition parties have been equally sluggish to respond to the disaster and that it took them a full eight days after the quake to approach donors and international NGO's for funds to conduct their own relief operations.



The quake caused widespread destruction affecting about eight million people, the UN says



Nepal has very few helicopters to distribute relief materials

So what political impact will the quake devastation have? As Varughese explains, it is hard to tell because none of the political parties have credible claim to being more effective at governance. "So instead of the toppling of the current coalition, we can imagine a national unity government emerging to handle the relief efforts, with the UCPN (Maoist) and Madhesi parties joining the government," said the analyst.

Journalist Neupane, however, believes this is unlikely to happen in the coming months given the current strong public distrust directed at all political parties. This may also further delay the constitution-drafting process, she underlined. "But if the parties understand the sentiment of Nepali people at all, they may try and re-build their image. This is actually a very good time for them to do so."

Analyst Evans believes that following the earthquake, the public are more likely to protest the ineffective or non-existent provision of government services, particularly if suspicion grows that individual officials or the bureaucracy are absorbing much of the additional international aid coming in for disaster relief.

The failure of the Constituent Assembly, which functions as Nepal's parliament, to draft and pass

other much-needed policies, including on electricity, foreign direct investment, and infrastructure, as well as establish political legitimacy at the local level before the earthquake, means that the government is in an increasingly vulnerable position, said Evans.

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