

Hundreds dead in Afghanistan and Pakistan after 7.5 magnitude earthquake

By Oscar Grenfell
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A 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck north-eastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan on Monday afternoon, leaving hundreds dead and thousands injured, and created a mounting humanitarian disaster.

The areas of Afghanistan most affected have been ravaged by the consequences of 15 years of US military occupation and ongoing conflict. They are centres of grinding poverty. The tribal areas of Pakistan that were hit by the quake have been subjected to years of Pakistani government military operations and illegal US drone strikes.

According to initial reports, the death toll from the earthquake stands at around 335, with at least 82 people killed in Afghanistan and 253 in Pakistan. Another 1,000 people have been reported injured in Pakistan and over 200 in Afghanistan. The toll is expected to rise sharply. Many of the affected areas are remote and cut off from outside communication. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, telecommunications went down throughout Afghanistan.

The quake was centred in the Hindu Kush mountain range, between the two countries. The epicentre is thought to have been near Jarm, in the northeast of Afghanistan, some 250 kilometres from the capital, Kabul. A 7.6 magnitude earthquake which struck near the same area in October 2005, killed around 75,000 people, and left some 3.5 million more displaced.

According to Afghanistan's chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, yesterday's quake was the strongest felt in recent years. Government officials have said that 103 districts in 14 Afghan provinces have been hit. A state of emergency has been declared in both countries, while in Pakistan, the army has deployed troops to the worst affected regions.

The quake resulted in widespread scenes of chaos,

with buildings and homes collapsing, power outages and landslides occurring in many areas.

Pakistani journalist, Zubair Khan, who was in Pakistan's Swat Valley at the time of the quake, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC): "We were very scared ... we saw people leaving buildings ... I was in my car, and when I stopped my car, the car itself was shaking as if someone was pushing it back and forth."

Local officials reported that at least 35 people were killed in the valley, and some 250 others required medical attention. Around 100 homes were destroyed.

According to provincial authorities in Peshawar, the death toll in the northern Khyber-Pakhtunkwa province spiked to 121 by Monday evening. In the mountainous regions of Chitral and Gilgit, landslides were reported, cutting off transport to a number of areas. Five people were reported dead in the central province of Punjab.

The death toll in Pakistan's remote Federally Administered Tribal Area, near the border with Afghanistan, is not yet known, but is expected to be high. The mountainous region has been a central target of Washington's illegal drone strikes since 2004, which have killed as many as 3,989 people.

The quake also hit Pakistan's major urban centres, including Lahore and the capital Islamabad, sending thousands of people fleeing shaking buildings.

Al Jazeera featured the comments of Waqas Habibi Rana, a resident of Lahore, who said: "The third tremor was really severe. It was by far the worst earthquake I have ever experienced in Pakistan. Everyone was scared and praying."

Extended tremors were also felt in parts of India, including New Delhi.

Afghanistan's capital, Kabul was severely affected, with buildings shaking for almost a minute, and reports

of walls cracking, and cars rolling.

The hardest hit area of Afghanistan was Badakhshan province, at the epicentre of the earthquake. At least 1,400 homes were destroyed in 27 districts. The initial death toll was reported at 10, but is expected to rise. The sparsely populated province is prone to natural disasters, including floods, landslides and earthquakes. A landslide in 2014 killed over 2,500 people. The province was also the target of a Taliban offensive last month.

Widespread damage was reported in nearby Takhar province, which has also been the scene of intense fighting between the Taliban and US-NATO led forces over the past few months. In one incident during the quake in Takhar, 12 school girls under the age of 16 were trampled to death as they sought to flee their school building, which had as many as 900 students inside.

In Kunar province, at least 30 people have been reported dead, and some 1,100 homes destroyed from the quake, heavy rains and landslides.

The grinding poverty and inadequate housing prevalent throughout the affected regions has played a major role in the severity of the disaster.

The US Geological Survey, which measured the quake, noted that, “the population in this region resides in structures that are highly vulnerable to earthquake shaking ... The predominant vulnerable building types are adobe block and unreinforced brick with timber floor construction.”

Many of those in the affected areas in both Pakistan and Afghanistan have little or no access to medical services, meaning that the quake will result in a deepening humanitarian and health crisis. At the same time, thousands of people have been left homeless as the bitter winter months approach.

“The devastation is going to be huge,” said Fazl Din, a doctor in Peshawar speaking to *USA Today*. “It is very difficult to reach the far-flung villages. The governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan have no proper disaster management units.”

The devastating consequences of the natural disaster will be compounded by the long US-led neo-colonial occupation, and decades of civil war and conflict fuelled by the intrigues of Washington and the other major powers in the Central Asian region.

The recent success of the Taliban’s offensives in

Kunduz, Takhar and elsewhere has underscored that the US-led forces have been unable to secure a stable puppet government with national authority.

The criminal character of the US-led war, which has led to at least 19,000 civilian deaths since 2009 alone, was underscored by the bombing of a major Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders trauma centre in Kunduz at the beginning of the month. The air raid followed the takeover of the city by Taliban forces last month.

The hospital was the only one of its kind in north eastern Afghanistan and is now closed, meaning it cannot provide any assistance to those injured as a result of the earthquake. The facility was deliberately targeted for destruction by the US army. The bombing killed 22 people, including 12 doctors, nurses and medical personnel, and 10 patients, including three children.

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