

CHINA: EARTHQUAKE IN NW TIBET

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The Disaster

On Saturday, 8 November, at 18h02 local time (10h02 GMT) a violent earthquake of at least 7.5 magnitude (measured at 7.9 magnitude surface measurement) on the Richter Scale rocked a sparsely populated area of north-western Tibet (Xizang). Located high in the Tibetan Plateau, 4000 - 6000 metres above sea level (13,000 - 19,700 feet), most of the inhabitants are nomadic herders of sheep, cattle and horses. The casualty figures are expected to be very low as most live in flexible yak-skin tents. However, the region is difficult to access. Search and rescue teams are hampered by falling snow and low temperatures.

The epicentre has been pinpointed at 35.04° north and 87.31° east in Nyima County, at a depth of 10 km. The north-south jeep track that goes through Margai pass, serves as the main transportation route through this part of the Plateau. Wembu County also lies in the affected area.

Tibet has a population of 2.3 million people living in 1.2 million square km area (approximately twice the size of France).

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

In spite of difficult obstacles in communication, the Red Cross Society of China's (RCSC) Prefecture Branch, Autonomous Regional Headquarters in Lhasa, and National headquarters in Beijing, were able to channel information to the International Federation Secretariat and its Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur (RDKL). Shortly after the earthquake struck on Saturday, Dr. Sun Baiqui, RCSC Vice President, was in contact with the Provincial headquarters. The Relief Department and the International Department will remain in contact with the Secretary General of the Provincial headquarters.

Two teams, comprised of RCSC Nagqu Branch staff, Tibetan Autonomous Region government officials, and members of its earthquake bureau, are moving into the area to conduct needs and damage assessments. Due to the arduous travel conditions, and distances between enclaves, some time will be required to determine what the impact of this earthquake has been on its human population.

Within hours of the earthquake, the Nagqu Prefecture branch and the local Public Health Bureau had dispatched 2 medical teams to the area. Additional teams, organised in Lhasa, are on stand-by to be deployed if needed.

The consortium of National Societies (Swiss, Norwegian and Netherlands) working with the Tibetan RC on health programmes has exchanged information with the Secretariat several times in the past 24 hours. The Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur and the South Asia Regional Representative have also assisted in the gathering and exchange of information.

Due to the small population in this area, it is not anticipated that a large number of casualties exist. However those affected will most probably have some needs, including comforting from the psychological stress produced by such a big earthquake. As the assessments progress the needs will be communicated to National Headquarters which will inform the International Federation. From past experience and local knowledge, the RCSC staff and volunteers are mobilising medical personnel, medicine, warm clothes, quilts, and food to be distributed if determined to be needed by the initial assessment with the expectation that needs can be met locally.

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