

CHINA: EARTHQUAKE

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The Disaster

At 19:31 and 19:38 hours on Thursday 19 November 1998, two earthquakes measuring 5.6 and 6.2 in magnitude (respectively) hit a rural area on the border of Yunnan and Sichuan Province in the South Western part of China. Yunnan Province borders on Tibet, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Following the two main earthquakes, a reported 200 aftershocks are reported to have hit the region, causing additional damage to the already weakened structures.

Initial reports indicate that the worst affected areas were in five Yunnan counties around Ninglang Li Autonomous County (including Lijiang) and Yanyuan in neighbouring Sichuan. Initial accounts from the area indicate that a large number of homes have been destroyed or damaged, with some 1,383 injuries resulting from the earthquake, and three fatalities. The Ninglang area has been the centre of a bout of seismic activity since early October, when a quake measuring 5.2 occurred on 27 October, 1998, leaving 28 injured.

Latest reports (as of 22 November) from the official Chinese News Agency estimated a total number of 17,500 buildings have been damaged, including 400 schools. Local reports from the Red Cross indicate that the quake had been forecast and the local population warned to move out of their homes as soon as the first seismic activity was felt. It appears that many of the casualties occurred when families returned to their homes after the initial quake, only to be caught by falling rocks and roof tiles in a second tremor which the Chinese authorities measured at 6.2.

There are an estimated 30,000 homeless, most of these sheltered in the open in makeshift shelters. A total of between 170,000 and 220,000 are reported to have been affected by the disaster. Temperatures in this mountainous area are currently around 0 degrees Celsius.

The affected region has traditionally been a poor area which has received support in the past from the central government. Yunnan Province has a high number of ethnic minorities (approximately 30% of the total living in China). Both Ninglang and Yanyuan are mainly populated by the Yi minority. Being located in a mountainous area, the agricultural outputs are relatively low, which means the population have had to rely on assistance from outside.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Red Cross Secretary General of Yunnan Province arrived in the area with an assessment team on Saturday, 21 November to try and quantify the full extent of the damage. Initial findings from the assessment are anticipated on Monday 23 November. Access to the region has been complicated by the fact that many of the roads have been destroyed, and emergency teams have had to resort to travelling by foot to reach the disaster area.

The local authorities have released 1,000 blankets, 2,000 quilts and winter clothes, and 1,000 tents to help with temporary shelter. Food and medical supplies are also reported to have been sent to the area by the Ninglang Civil Affairs Bureau. Although the roads have suffered heavy damage, creating major difficulties in transporting relief supplies, some assistance has reached those remote areas which sustained the most serious damage.

The Red Cross Disaster Preparedness Centre in Kuming, the capital city of Yunnan Province, has started the process of raising funds and donations to provide additional clothing, blankets, and tents to be delivered to the affected area. The Provincial Red Cross is known for its resourcefulness and efficiency in dealing with such emergencies as the Lijiang area was also heavily damaged by a similar severe earthquake in February 1996.

Needs

Given the number of persons affected by this disaster, the initial distributions carried out by the Red Cross and the Government may not be sufficient to cover the main needs of the affected population. Until a more complete needs assessment indicating remaining unmet needs can be carried out, during this initial emergency phase the main urgent requirements will be for shelter (in the form of heavy tents), blankets, heavy winter clothing, medicine, and food.

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