

Update – earthquake situation in sikkim, india

Nestling in the Himalayas between Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, Sikkim is a region of mountain myths, Buddhist monasteries and scattered communities far outside the mainstream of Indian life. Sikkim was controlled by 'chogkals' (kings) until 1975, when India intervened after an uprising against the monarchy by the majority-Nepali population who migrated into the region in the 19th century. The former kingdom, which only became part of India in 1975, has no airports or railway stations and foreign tourists must obtain special permits before visiting. Sikkim is renowned for its pristine scenery of plunging valleys and abundant wildlife. It is however now the scene of a major rescue and relief operation after Sunday's destructive 6.9-magnitude earthquake.

A grimmer picture of devastation emerged on Tuesday as soldiers blasted boulders blocking hill roads and reached isolated areas like Mangan, 65km from Gangtok. With help reaching faraway regions, the body count raced passed 130 and could rise as many more are feared trapped.

Officially, Sikkim has so far confirmed 58 deaths, the rest of the casualties being from Bhutan, Nepal, Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. But as shocking details emerged, authorities feared at least 40 workers at a hydel power plant site in North Sikkim's Saffo might have perished within minutes, caught in a mountain duct when the tectonic plates under the lower Himalayas shook. Dozens others are missing and feared trapped in the same hydel project site and there's no confirmation of the number of people engaged there. Elsewhere, rescue teams inched close to the quake epicenter and columns of soldiers, riding trucks, tractors and earthmovers and armed with drills, cutters and pick-axes, completed an arduous trek to enter Mangan, the flattened headquarters of the North Sikkim district.

Mangan was a picture of devastation as many anxious and distraught residents waited as National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) personnel with Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Indian Army men toiled to clear debris from blocked roads. The army used explosives to blow up boulder piles, some as tall as three-story buildings. In Gangtok, Sikkim DGP Jasbir Singh said he feared the toll could go much higher. "Yes, large areas are still cut off. We fear the toll could rise."

At Mangan, most men, women, children, still haunted by the nightmarish quake, sleep outside their houses, some in the open spaces of the town. The Ringhim monastery and the Ambithang Church collapsed, killing one person. Giant boulders blocked roads and landslides had flattened entire localities. "On reaching Mangan, we realized the epicenter was 50km north, where villages and habitations have suffered the worst damage," an NDRF officer said. Rescue teams set off for the area but their progress was stopped by a fresh landslide while almost all the buildings in the town have developed cracks due to the impact of the high intensity earthquake on Sunday (6.9 magnitude), the worst-hit Chungthang, about 28 km from here, and other areas such as Bay, Saffo, Pegong, still remain inaccessible.

On the third day after a devastating quake hit the northeast, including Sikkim, the 95-km-long alternative road from Gangtok to Mangan, the headquarters of North District of the State, was opened for vehicular traffic on Tuesday. The Sikkim government is apprehensive that it will take at

least a month to restore a semblance of normality to the areas worst affected by Sunday's earthquake near the State's border with Nepal. About 150 injured people have been admitted in hospitals. Some have been moved to hospitals in West Bengal and Delhi, Minister for Rural Management and Development C. B. Karki told The Hindu, one of leading national newspapers, over telephone from Gangtok.

With about 1,300 homes destroyed and more than a hundred thousand partially damaged in the tremors and their aftermath, about 10,000 people have been rendered homeless. They have been evacuated to shelters, he added. The roads leading up to Mangan in North District, the worst affected by the quake, have been cleared to allow vehicles, but the areas beyond remain blocked. All State highways have been damaged. Road connectivity to all parts of South, East and West districts should be restored within a week, Mr. Karki said. With pipelines disrupted, water supply has been seriously hit. Usha Lachumpa of Gangtok said that while a sense of normality had returned to the capital, there was a problem with water supply. "Barring Gangtok, power supply to the other parts of the State remains disrupted," Mr. Karki said.

Sikkim Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling has convened a series of meetings to assess the situation. He has visited the affected areas in East District and will be going to North District on September 22, South District on September 23 and West District on September 24 to supervise rescue and relief operations, said K. S. Tobgay, Secretary of the Information and Public Relations Department.

The rapid assessment by members of Inter Agency Group from Assam (including a Field Officer from CASA) is currently underway however, considering that many areas still remain cut off and given the difficult terrain and climatic conditions it may take some more time for us to be able to put together a preliminary appeal which reflects true needs on the ground. As can be understood from this compilation of information from various news sources, the situation is catastrophic and needs response on a substantial scale.

While the immediate emerging needs are those for shelter, food, clothing, blankets, medical aid, water and sanitation etc., CASA and LWSI(T) would also like to respond to mid and long term needs in terms of livelihood restoration and house repair and reconstruction.

We therefore sincerely request our resource sharing partners to help facilitate a response that is both credible and meaningful given the magnitude of the disaster.

We will continue to keep the partnership apprised of the developing situation through similar updates sent to the ACT Secretariat.