



Earthquake on the roof of the world

BY GOPAL SHARMA, ROSS ADKIN, SANJEEV MIGLANI,
ANDREW MACASKILL AND DOUGLAS BUSVINE

APRIL 25 - DECEMBER 20 KATHMANDU / DHADING / JHARIBAR / DHUNCHE / KHUMJUNG

Terror and panic in Kathmandu as deadly quake struck

BY GOPAL SHARMA AND ROSS ADKIN

APRIL 25 KATHMANDU

Nepalese tourist guide Naba Raj Amgai had just returned home from a mountain-biking trip when his home in the capital Kathmandu began to shake, sending a fridge and television smashing to the ground.

He and his wife bolted for the stairs. Outside, his neighbours were pouring onto the street, shouting and crying.

“It was horrible,” said Amgai, who was standing out on the street several hours later. “I still haven’t gone back inside.”

The magnitude 7.9 earthquake, Nepal’s biggest for 81 years, struck west of Kathmandu just before noon on Saturday. Officials said it had killed at least 1,130 people in the Himalayan nation and dozens in neighbouring countries.

The quake was also felt across Bangladesh, northern India and Chinese Tibet, collapsing ancient buildings, modern complexes and modest village homes.

Eyewitnesses described scenes of panic and confusion in the Nepali capital when the ground started shaking beneath their feet, sending people running out of their homes and onto streets choked with thick dust.

“The ground underneath me was shaking. I thought I was going to sink into it,” said Hari Adhikari, a 60-year-old vegetable seller.

In Patan, a densely packed neighbourhood, a Reuters reporter heard neighbours screaming as the first tremor hit.

“I was eating near the city centre in Kathmandu when suddenly the tables started trembling and paintings on the wall fell on the ground,” Devyani Pant, an Indian tourist in Kathmandu, told Reuters. “I screamed and rushed outside.”

Across the region, people were injured in the scramble to get out of shaking buildings and onto safer ground.

In the Indian state of West Bengal, dozens of children were caught up in stampedes to leave two different school buildings, according to an official in Malda district, with several sustaining minor injuries.

In Bangladesh, buildings across the old part of the capital Dhaka cracked from the impact, and several workers in a garment factory were hurt as they rushed to escape.

“TREMENDOUS CRISIS”

As the aftershocks continued to rock Kathmandu, people remained in the streets.

Phone lines were jammed.

“We have been flooded with phone calls from all around the world,” Mohan Krishna Sapkota, joint secretary in the Nepal tourism ministry,



I spoke to my family in the village and they said our house has been completely destroyed.



Kathmandu
Resident Yira Lama

told Reuters. “We are facing a tremendous crisis here and it is hard to even assess what the death toll and the extent of damage could be.”

The ministry estimated that 300,000 foreign tourists and trekkers were in Nepal when the earthquake struck. There were reports that at least 18 people had been killed in an avalanche unleashed by the earthquake that swept through the climbers’ base camp on the world’s highest mountain, Everest.

In hospitals in the capital, nurses and doctors moved patients outside, setting up makeshift treatment areas. One patient told a Reuters reporter he had broken his leg when he jumped from the third floor of a building.

By nightfall, as the death toll climbed, volunteers had started to help authorities gather bodies and pile them into ambulances. Residents, instructed not to return to their homes, had begun to set up camps for the night.

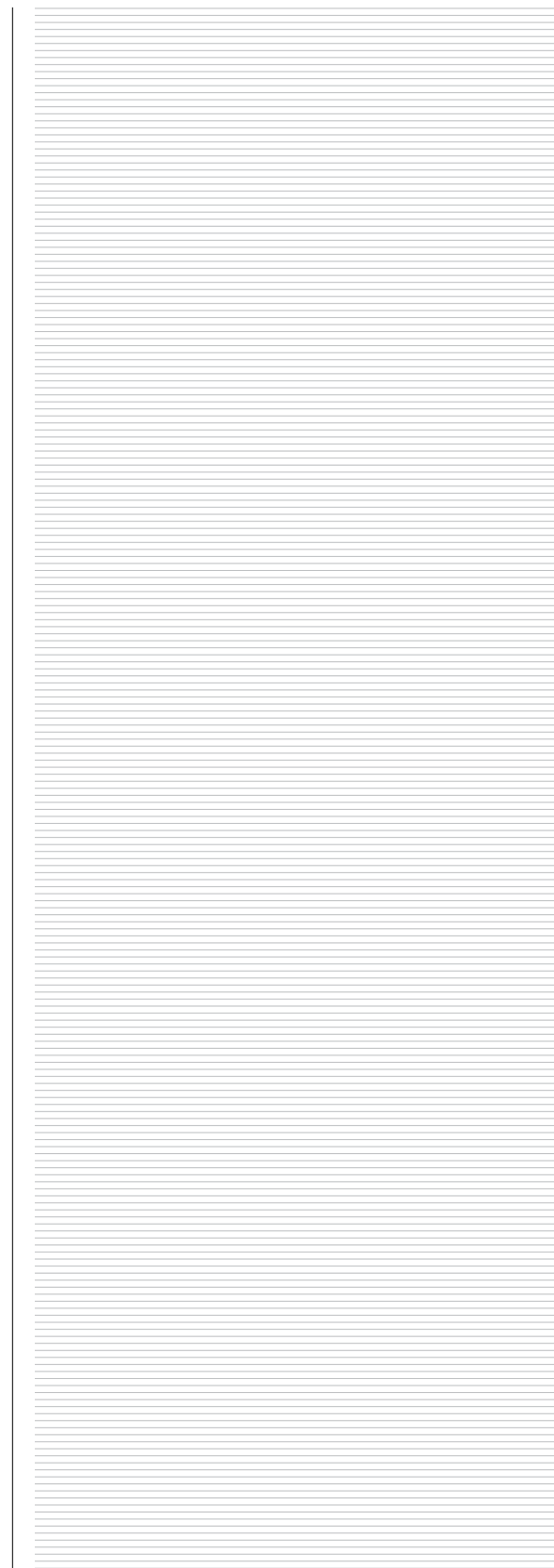
At the Smarak school in Patan, some 350 people gathered on a playing field, setting up tents, with volunteers handing out tea and water.

Yira Lama, who had been living in a rented room in Kathmandu but comes from a village not far from the epicentre, said he planned to stay the night there.

“I spoke to my family in the village and they said our house has been completely destroyed,” he said. 

Additional reporting by **Serajul Quadir** in Dhaka, **Krista Mahr** and **Rupam Jain Nair** in New Delhi, **Sujoy Dhar** in Kolkata and **Manoj Chaurasia** in Patna

Writing by **Krista Mahr**; Editing by **Paritosh Bansal** and **Mark Trevelyan**



In Kathmandu Valley, quake-hit Nepalis fend for themselves

BY ROSS ADKIN

APRIL 26 DHADING

Barely any sign of an organised relief effort was visible outside Nepal's capital on Sunday, as aid agencies struggled to fly and truck relief supplies to a country stricken by its worst earthquake in eight decades.

In the lush Dhading farming district 80 km (50 miles) outside Kathmandu, people camped in the open, the hospital was overflowing, the power was off and shops were closed. Rocks

were strewn across the lightly-travelled single road running west from the capital.

"Many people have lost their homes. Many people have died," said English teacher Chandra Lama, whose home village lies two hours' drive further west. The crops in his village ruined, Lama was hunting for rice and pulses to feed his family.

"We are waiting to see what the government will do."

More than 1,100 people – or half of the total confirmed dead in Nepal – were in the Kathmandu Valley, a crossroads of the ancient civilisations of Asia and economic hub of the Himalayan nation of 28 million.

Indian military helicopters airlifted some injured to local hospitals but officials said their operations had been hampered by rain, cloud cover and repeated aftershocks. With thousands sleeping in the open with no power or water and downpours forecast, fears mounted of a humanitarian disaster.

Across the country, hundreds of villages have been left to fend for themselves.

"We are overwhelmed with rescue and assistance request from all across the country," said Deepak Panda, a member of the country's disaster management.

Charity CARE International said that the death toll could run into the thousands, with hundreds of thousands homeless.

"Almost everyone has slept outside and they are creating temporary shelters with what they have," said CARE's emergency response coordinator in Kathmandu, Santosh Sharma. CARE said shelter and washing facilities were a priority, as well as food.

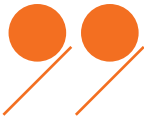
"There is no electricity, and soon there will be a scarcity of water."

Aid agencies held a first meeting with the Nepali government on Sunday to coordinate the relief effort.

But the majority of rescue workers face a gruelling journey by land from Nepal's state capital Kathmandu along rough, badly damaged roads, more often frequented by groups of adventurous tourists heading for Himalayan trekking trails.



For this new batch of patients there will probably not be enough medicine to last for today.



Rashila Amatya
Medical superintendent at Dhading District Hospital

URGENT NEED

British charity Save the Children said hospitals in the Kathmandu Valley were overcrowded, running out of room to store dead bodies and short on emergency supplies.

“Thousands of people have to stay outside of their homes, which have been damaged or destroyed by the earthquake. Shelter assistance is urgently needed,” said Save the Children’s Peter Olyle, who is based in Kathmandu.

Charity Medecins sans Frontieres was struggling to get relief supplies including thousands of blankets and shelter in from India’s northern state of Bihar – also hit by Saturday’s quake – because landslides had made roads difficult to navigate.

Strong aftershocks further hampered aid and caused panic after the Saturday’s midday quake, which measured 7.9 on the Richter scale and flattened buildings, opened cracks in roads and knocked out phone networks.

At the Dhading district hospital, patients were crammed in three to a bed and some being treated in the open. Officials reported 24 dead in the nearby village of Kumpur.

Three people lay on stretchers in a hospital corridor waiting for treatment. Bins were filled with used bandages and medical equipment as the hospital ran short of supplies, while volunteers had to help overstretched medical staff.

“No, I didn’t sleep last night,” said Rashila Amatya, medical superintendent at the hospital. New patients were being brought in from outlying areas on Sunday.


“For this new batch of patients there will probably not be enough medicine to last for today.”

Basudev Ghimire, head of the local rescue unit, said that more than 130 people had been killed in the district but the number injured ran into the thousands.

The Indian military, he said, had brought more than 100 people by helicopter to the district hospital or to Kathmandu. But they had brought no supplies; only evacuated people.

Meanwhile, locals prepared for another cold night outside.

Officials on motorcycles rode through the

town, telling residents through loudhailers that it was not safe to go indoors because of the risk of aftershocks. People were building tents with bamboo and sheets, with at least 1,000 ready to spend the night in several makeshift camps. 

Additional reporting by **Rupam Nair** in Kathmandu; **Clara Ferreira Marques** and **Neha Dasgupta** in Mumbai

Writing by **Douglas Busvine**; Editing by **Sophie Walker**

Near remote Nepal quake epicentre, survivors dig for loved ones alone

BY SANJEEV MIGLANI

APRIL 28 JHARIBAR

Her husband away in India, Sunthalia worked alone for hours in the rubble of her house perched on a ridge near the epicentre of Nepal's earthquake to pull out the bodies of her 10-year-old daughter and a son aged eight.

Another son of four miraculously survived.

Three other houses in their remote settlement, an hour's walk up the lush green Gorkha valley, had collapsed. It was deathly quiet after Saturday's quake, she recalls.

"I could see my son's fingers fluttering

through the pile of stones. That's how I could see him and save him," Sunthalia said, sitting listlessly on the ground, her son by her side.

The stench of dead cattle still in the rubble of her home is overpowering. There is little government help so far; the only thing families such as hers have been given is a thin tarpaulin sheet to lie under.

Four days after the country's most powerful quake in 81 years, authorities are struggling to determine the extent of the disaster in the Gorkha region and neighbouring Lamjung where the epicentre lay, let alone provide succour.

The central government in Kathmandu still has little precise information on where the damage is most extensive and who needs help urgently. So far the official death toll has reached 4,349 in Nepal, but could more than double.

"The death toll could go up to 10,000 because information from remote villages hit by the earthquake is yet to come in," Prime Minister Sushil Koirala told Reuters in the capital.

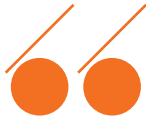
MOUNTAINTOP DWELLINGS

Communities are so spread out in Gorkha that some mountaintop dwellings further north in the Barpak and Laprak areas can only be reached by walking three or four days.

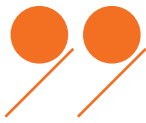
The fear is that there are many more like Sunthalia who are alone in isolated settlements further away, burying their dead and living out in the open with little food, water, or access to urgent medical help.

On Tuesday, army soldiers were racing towards Barpak in two bus loads and then by foot up steep slopes to reach people feared trapped in their homes. A heavy downpour made their progress even more difficult.

Army helicopters tried twice to land in the Barpak area on Monday, but they could not find a suitable site, said Rishi Khatri, the Gorkha district health official who flew on one of the flights to help airlift the seriously injured.



Even then, the tremors carried on. We were running, falling to the ground, and then running again.



Earthquake survivor Santoshi of Hulakdanda village

They also circled over Laprak, where, according to local development records, there are 1,700 houses. Khatri estimates 1,600 were razed to the ground. They dropped food packets in the hope that survivors could gather them up.

“We couldn’t see anyone from the air, no movement at all,” said Khatri. “It is worrying; we think the number of casualties will rise many fold.”

The only thing he could see on some mountaintops were the rotting carcasses of cattle.

The Gorkha region of snow-crested mountains and vast valleys is home to the builder of modern Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah. He founded the Shah dynasty who ruled the Himalayan nation of 28 million people for 240 years until the abolition of the monarchy in 2008.

Gurkha soldiers in service in the Nepali, Indian and British armies also draw their name from the region.

Many men are away on deployment, leaving wives, children and the infirm at home.

“RUNNING, FALLING, RUNNING”

Santoshi, another survivor in Hulakdanda village, said she was thrown off a hillside by the earthquake as she sat eating her lunch outside while her two children played indoors.

She rushed back to find them hiding under the bed.

“Even then the tremors carried on. We were running, falling to the ground, and then running again.”


A part of the hillside in Hulakdanda had caved in, releasing a torrent of rocks and mud into the stream below. Villagers said they had seen the gushing clear stream turn crimson, spouting mud and filth during the tremors.

“There is big damage on top of the mountains. The higher you go, the greater the destruction,” said Tirthankar Thapa, who works for Kokila Nepal, a non-government organisation providing relief to people hit by the quake.

Thapa said survivors were forced to bury

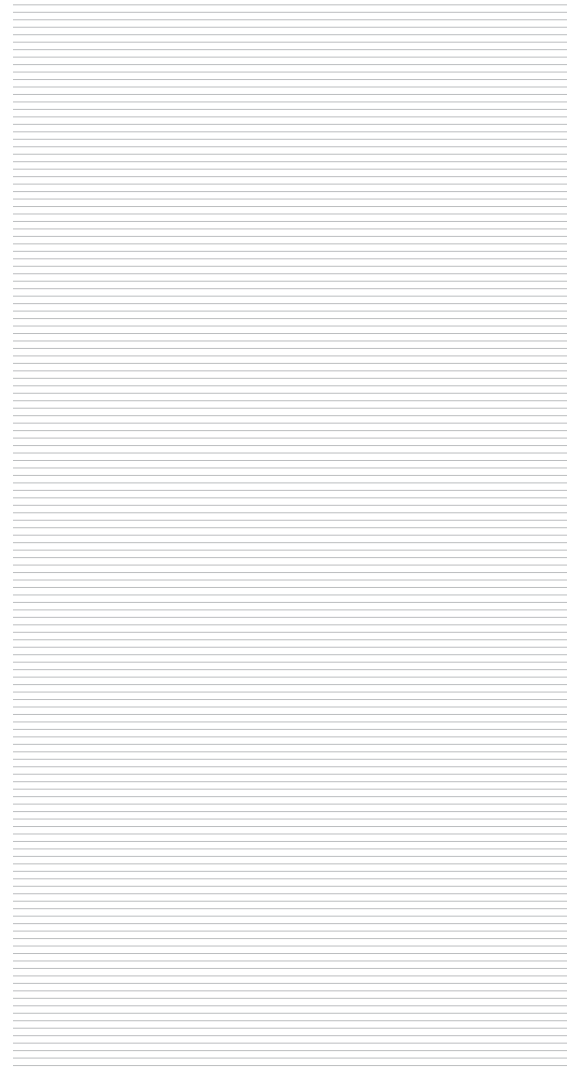
their dead even though that was not the custom among Hindu families.

Shyam Lal Shreshta, who lost his wife and mother-in-law in the disaster, waited for several hours to try and arrange a cremation. But as night fell he and his son took the bodies to the side of the stream and buried them there.

“There is nothing we have got from anyone. There is no government, no Red Cross, we don’t even have a tent to sit in and mourn our loss,” he said. 

Additional reporting by **Gopal Sharma**

Editing by **Douglas Busvine** and **Mike Collett-White**



Survivors battle for helicopters near Nepal village that vanished

BY ANDREW MACASKILL AND DOUGLAS BUSVINE

MAY 7 DHUNCHE

It was three foreign trekkers who used their satellite telephone to call the rescue helicopter that landed in Nepal's Langtang Valley around midday on Tuesday, April 28. Three days earlier, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake had triggered a catastrophic landslide that buried hundreds of people in one village in the valley.

But villagers clung to the chopper's landing skids, preventing it from taking off, witnesses said. They then led the uninjured foreign trekkers out of the aircraft and carried injured

Nepalis aboard, including a toddler with broken legs, at a rescue in another village, Kyanjin Gompa.

"Most helicopters were coming to pick up the foreigners, who were healthy, not our injured people," said Lhakpa Jangba, a local baker who was interviewed at a monastery in Kathmandu after his evacuation from the valley last week.

"We said to the foreigners, 'You are healthy. Stay one or two more days and let our injured people go.'"

Rescue workers are struggling to recover the bodies of nearly 300 people, including about 110 foreigners, believed to be buried under up to six metres (20 feet) of ice, snow and rock from the landslide that destroyed Langtang Village. So far, the bodies of nine foreigners have been recovered. That makes Langtang one of the worst-hit sites in a disaster whose toll throughout Nepal has reached 7,759 dead with over 16,400 injured.

Langtang Lirung, the 7,234-metre (23,734 feet) mountain looming over the Langtang Valley, shook violently, survivors recalled. It then shed a gigantic slice that fell hundreds of feet, launching a massive torrent of air, snow, ice and rock upon the village and its 55 guest-houses, brimming with trekkers at the start of the climbing season.

The stunning landscapes of Langtang Valley, the nearest Himalayan region to Kathmandu, which lies 60 km (35 miles) to the south, make it popular with foreign climbers and trekkers.

This is the second successive year a catastrophe on the roof of the world has disrupted the climbing season. Last year, sherpas threatened a boycott of Mt. Everest expeditions after 16 were killed in an avalanche on the perilous Khumbu icefall. Eighteen died at Everest Base Camp in April's quake. It's a big business: Everest expedition companies charge clients between \$40,000 and \$90,000, depending on the number of guides and other services they want. Sherpas can make as little as \$1,000 in a whole season.

Those who come to the Langtang Valley are



Our guide screamed: ‘Avalanche, run!’ We ran through the town as fast as we could, but you can’t outrun an avalanche.



Kat Heldman
U.S. mountaineer

a mix of experienced climbers and adventure trekkers.

“Everest is for very specialised, skilled climbers, while those in Langtang were people on adventure holidays – most without any guides,” said Prachanda Man Shrestha, a former head of Nepal’s tourism department. “Anyone can get to Langtang, you are walking at high altitude, but if you are reasonably fit you can go there.”

‘SUBTERRANEAN UNIVERSE’

U.S. mountaineer Kevin Krogh was filming people fleeing a shaking guest house in Kyanjin Gompa in the Langtang Valley in the midst of the quake. The video abruptly ends with people looking back toward the Langtang Himal range as a foggy cloud enters the frame.

Krogh, 32, and his wife, Kat Heldman, 40, had left Langtang Village early Saturday morning with the rest of their party for the three-hour trek to Kyanjin Gompa.

The quake was “like nothing I’ve ever seen in California”, real estate broker Heldman told Reuters in a telephone interview from her home in San Diego after her evacuation.

“We see this giant cloud of white. It was moving very fast – we knew it was an avalanche. Our guide screamed: ‘Avalanche, run!’ We ran through the town as fast as we could, but you can’t outrun an avalanche.”

Heldman said she ran about 100 feet before diving behind a wall just as the juggernaut of ice, rock and snow caught up to her. She crouched down, putting up her arms “so that I know which way is up if I’m buried”. Someone else came up behind her and she grabbed onto him until the avalanche ended. “When it stopped, and it did stop, we could stand up. He had lost his shoes.”

She looked around and saw Krogh digging out another member of their party, Oscar Olea. “If you were on the wrong side of a building, you were going to get buried,” Heldman said.

She ran into the guest house to get some rescue gear, past a British trekker. “His face was totally bloody – just standing there holding

this baby. He gave it to the mother.”

Frightened yaks and horses wandered around “a subterranean universe – all grey and white”, she recalled.

Her party had hired two guides from a Nepali company called Expedition Himalaya, along with two cooks and 15 porters. They had intended to climb the majestic 6,387-metre (19,680 feet) Gangchempo peak in Langtang National Park.

Instead, they set up a triage station and a dining tent and went in search of the missing. The fellow climber shown on Krogh’s video fleeing from the guest house, nurse Brigida Martinez, treated a number of head wounds after the avalanche. The group had 12 days of food for their expedition that they intended to share with survivors.

UNDER THE OVERHANG

Toyanath Rijal was just outside Langtang Village scouting for a location to build a mobile telephone tower when the quake knocked him and three colleagues off their feet.

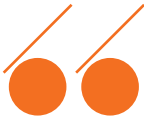
First, he said he heard a sound like thunder, then an almighty crack. He turned to see a chunk of rock and ice sliding down the mountain, sweeping away everything before it. “It was like watching a wave crashing down the hillside,” said Rijal, 40, interviewed in Dhunche, a town in the foothills of Langtang National Park and the base for recovery operations in Langtang.

The landslide was so powerful it travelled across a plateau below the mountain range, over a river and up the other side of the valley, he said.

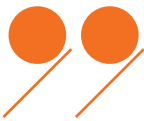
Rijal watched all this from under a 40-foot high slab of overhanging rock where he had scrambled for shelter with his colleagues.

When the avalanche passed, Rijal fell to his knees clutching his upanayana, the sacred thread devout Hindus wear around their neck, and wept. “I have been given another opportunity in life and there must be a reason for that,” he said. “I’m going to use it.”

He spent the next three nights living in the



It took me
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Kat Heldman
U.S. mountaineer

open, scavenging for food and firewood around the smothered landscape of Langtang Village, where only one building was left partly standing.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE MISSING

Back in California, Kat Heldman's sister Caroline began calling satellite phone numbers that she obtained from Expedition Himalaya as soon as she heard about the earthquake in Nepal that Saturday, April 25. "I begged her expedition company to give me whatever satphone numbers they knew of in the region for guides," Caroline Heldman said in an email interview from Los Angeles, where she is a political science professor at Occidental College. "I called them one after another until I found her."

Thirty hours later, calling almost nonstop, she finally got through to Oscar Olea, the climber her sister's husband had dug out of the avalanche at Kyanjin Gumpa. "I didn't even know I was talking to him at first. I didn't know they were there. Honestly, according to their itinerary, I thought they were buried in Langtang Village."

On the other end of the line, Kat Heldman was also disoriented. "It took me a while to realise who was calling...that was the first time she knew that we were alive."

It was only then, when Caroline updated her with the news of the quake, that Kat said she realized the extent of the disaster.

Caroline quickly figured out that many families, authorities and even embassies might be in similar predicaments in trying to trace those missing in Nepal. So she started a #Langtang hashtag on Twitter and a Langtang Survivors/Missing group on Facebook. She helped create a Google doc that could be shared among users and listed 440 names – 80 of which were missing at one point. The number of missing has since fallen as survivors were found and victims recovered and identified.

SEPARATE CAMPS

The first rescue helicopter landed in Kyanjin Gumpa on Monday, April 27, two days after

the quake, carrying away a half-dozen injured, mainly from the village.

The second helicopter came the following day, called in by the three foreign climbers. That was one that the villagers prevented from flying until it took the injured on board.

More helicopters came in the hours and days ahead, each mobbed by village people desperate to get out, said Kat Heldman.

"All the mountaineers that had gear and tents and food adopted the trekkers that didn't have food," she said.

Noted American alpinist Colin Haley, who was two weeks into a climbing trip in the area, set up a water source for the climbers camp on an open plateau.

The villagers camped in a separate area from the climbers, by a garbage dump, because it was sheltered by a large boulder. "But we would go to them to treat their wounds," Heldman said. "Eventually they started coming to us. There was a lot of hugging."


Heldman and her group were evacuated the Wednesday following the quake. "Our party was initially broken up but we refused to go without our porters."

A U.S. Special Forces team in Nepal contracted a six-seater helicopter four days after the quake. Panicky survivors grabbed their bags and ran towards helicopters as soon as they landed, said Dan, a rescue coordinator who spoke on condition that his family name not be used.

"They had mountains on two sides and avalanches on the other. So you can imagine the fear. They realised they couldn't get out unless someone came to get them."

AFTER THE FOG CLEARED

Lhakpa Jangba, 34, the baker from Kyanjin Gumpa who witnessed the disputes between villagers and trekkers over the helicopter rescues, was caught up in the avalanche that hit the Heldman party. He sat weeping among a hundred or more other evacuated Nepalis sheltering beneath tarpaulins on the grounds of a Buddhist monastery in Kathmandu as he



I felt the snow hitting me on the back. It swept everything away – houses, people, horses.



Lhakpa Jangba
34, a baker from
Kyanjin Gompa

recalled his week-long ordeal.


He too heard the explosion on the mountain and saw the fog rolling down. Within seconds it was upon him. “We had no chance to run. I felt the snow hitting me on the back. It swept everything away – houses, people, horses.”

Joining a group of foreign climbers, he headed toward Langtang Village. Two sherpas carried a climber with a broken back. They stopped not far from Langtang Village. “The fog cleared and I could see that the whole of Langtang was gone.”

Lhakpa and a group of 80 or 90 survivors – most of them women, children and the elderly – camped out in the valley. They then returned to Kyanjin Gompa, waiting for rescue helicopters and sometimes squabbling with the foreigners.

As of Thursday, at least 300 people had been rescued from the Langtang Valley, said Gautam Rimal, assistant chief district officer. Lhakpa said he thinks many people died of their injuries in the valley because not enough helicopters arrived in time.

Villagers had “strong words” with the pilots and foreigners, but there was no violence, Lhakpa said. “Whoever survives has to unite. There is no other option.”

The villagers in Kyanjin Gompa were grateful to an American nurse and climbing group who treated many of their injured, Lhakpa said, apparently referring to Brigida Martinez and the Heldman group. “Our minds were lost. We were half-dead, half-alive.” 

Reporting by **Andrew MacAskill** in Dhunche and **Douglas Busvine** in New Delhi; Additional reporting by **Andrew R.C. Marshall** in Kathmandu

Writing by **Bill Tarrant**; Editing by **Peter Hirschberg**

Nepal climbers face ruin after quake, blockade hit Everest industry

BY ANDREW MACASKILL

DECEMBER 20 KHUMJUNG

Phurba Tashi Sherpa, the most accomplished high-altitude climber in history, holds a bucket and crowbar as he claws through the rubble of his home seven months after Nepal's earthquake shattered the country.

Despite years of guiding wealthy foreign clients up Mount Everest, something he has done 21 times – a joint record – the 44-year-old has been left penniless.

Phurba Tashi's predicament is shared by many Sherpas, whose homes, lodges and

restaurants were destroyed in the April disaster and who complain of a slow response from the government despite billions of dollars of Western aid.

Some retired guides must return to the peaks to earn money. Others are pulling their children out of schools in Kathmandu and hotel owners are firing staff.

To make matters worse, bookings so far point to a sharp drop in foreign mountaineers heading for Nepal in 2016, deterred by ruined infrastructure and an economic blockade along its border with India that threatens supplies of fuel and equipment.

"Everything I worked for was destroyed in a minute," said Phurba Tashi, standing in his village of Khumjung, a cluster of 80 stone houses perched on a plateau surrounded by breathtaking 23,000-foot (7,000-metre) mountains.

The earthquake that killed almost 9,000 people destroyed his eight-bedroom trekking lodge, badly damaged his house and caused a deadly avalanche nine miles away on the world's tallest peak.

The remote villages under Everest, which prospered in recent decades thanks to the booming climbing business, suffered some of the heaviest destruction in Nepal's deadliest disaster.

"TERRIBLE YEARS"

The Everest industry is in a state of upheaval following avalanches in 2014 and 2015 that killed 35 people, in the two most deadly incidents since climbers began ascending.

In 2013, there was an unprecedented mass brawl between Sherpas and climbers that exposed deep-rooted frustrations over a lack of recognition of the risks local guides take to get foreigners up and down the fabled summit.

They want a bigger slice of Nepal's \$360 million-a-year adventure travel industry, of which Everest is the cornerstone.

Bookings to scale the world's tallest mountain in 2016 have been a third to half lower than previous years, according to interviews



It has been two terrible years for Everest: we have had no summits and lots of fatalities.



Garrett Madison
Seattle-based
Madison
Mountaineering

with 18 of the largest climbing firms.

This would be the biggest drop since commercial climbing began on Everest in the early 1990s, and could leave hundreds of struggling Sherpas without work.

“It has been two terrible years for Everest: we have had no summits and lots of fatalities,” said Garrett Madison, who runs Seattle-based Madison Mountaineering. The team doctor died this year on the mountain and three Sherpas working for him were killed in 2014. “It will take time to restore confidence.”

In the past, deadly accidents have done little to dent Everest’s popularity, with risk being part of the allure. But next year could be different, as threats to the industry take on a political dimension.

An economic blockade of Nepal’s border with India could disrupt expeditions and deter would-be climbers, who typically pay a non-refundable fee of \$35,000 to \$100,000 for a chance to scale the peak.

Nepal has been facing an acute fuel crisis for three months since protesters in the lowland south, angered that a new constitution fails to reflect their interests, prevented supply trucks from entering from India.

This is crippling the landlocked Himalayan nation as it tries to recover from the earthquake that displaced millions in the central and eastern regions.

CATASTROPHE

Mountaineering firms say the blockade threatens the climbing season because there may be a shortage of fuel to airlift equipment, operate emergency rescue flights or provide enough cooking gas cylinders to survive for two months on the mountain.

“It is a crisis at the moment. It is going to be a catastrophe if this embargo continues,” said Phil Crampton, the owner of the New York-based Altitude Junkies.

Near the warren of royal palaces and temples in central Kathmandu’s bustling old town, Gobinda Bahadur Karki, the director of Nepal’s tourism department, is more upbeat.

He predicts the blockade will be over before the spring and says he is “expecting a good number of climbers” next year, because mountaineers used to assessing risks will not be discouraged by a rare natural disaster.

Back in Khumjung, the resentment is not just about the blockade tripling the cost of building materials that need to be carried from an airport three days’ walk away.

In a rural community where nine of 10 homes were damaged or destroyed by the earthquake, anger is rising over the government’s failure to spend \$4.1 billion of reconstruction money donated by foreign governments six months ago.

“We hear the politicians in Kathmandu are eating the money,” Phurba Tashi said.

Yuba Raj Khatiwada, vice chairman of Nepal’s planning commission, is in charge of spending the money and understands the frustration over the delays, but says the blockade has absorbed attention and prevented aid work.

“It has put us back in the relief rather than reconstruction stage,” he said.

TERRIBLE COST

For almost a century, western climbers have hired Nepal’s Sherpas to do the most dangerous work on Everest. It is a lucrative way of life in one of the world’s poorest countries, but comes at a cost.

More than 200 Sherpas have lost their lives working in the mountains and as many have been disabled by rockfalls, frostbite, and altitude-related illnesses.

Known as the “Everest Yak” because of his immense stamina, the quiet and diminutive Phurba Tashi is head Sherpa for Himalayan Experience, one of the largest Everest climbing companies.

He is the record holder at 34 summits for mountains over 8,000 metres (26,000 feet).

Yet he says for most of his career he has been paid less than western guides. Foreign guides can make \$10,000–\$35,000 a season, whereas Sherpas typically paid about \$6,000,



We hear the politicians in Kathmandu are eating the money.



Phurba Tashi,
Resident of Khumjung

according to two western professionals.

Since the two recent disasters on Everest, Phurba Tashi has been under immense pressure from his family to quit.

“I would rather we were poor than he took the risks,” said Karma Doma, his wife, as she served guests Sherpa tea and biscuits.

In 2016, Phurba Tashi will take a break from climbing to appease his family, and will try to earn an income growing potatoes on a small farm.

But eventually, he says, he will have to return to the peaks to support his children.

He has spent his \$20,000 life savings and borrowed \$10,000 to rebuild his home and lodge, both surrounded by rubble.

The next time he climbs Everest he will break the record.

“A lot of people tell me I should go one more time to break the record, but it doesn’t mean anything to me,” he said. “Since the earthquake, when I look back at my career, my biggest disappointment is that I am still worrying about my future.” [®]

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