

# China earthquakes kill hundreds, injure 10,000

Andrew Higgins, Washington Post, 4-15-10

BEIJING -- A series of severe earthquakes in a remote Tibetan district of western China killed hundreds of people Wednesday and triggered a major rescue operation that highlighted the growing power of public opinion in a country that was once slow to acknowledge such calamities.

As temperatures in Qinghai province dipped below freezing, Chinese soldiers and paramilitary forces poured into the impoverished region to join rescue efforts and keep order. At least 589 people died in the disaster and 10,000 were injured, according to official reports.

The strongest quake hit at 7:49 local time Wednesday morning, flattening homes, offices, a hotel and parts of at least two schools in Jiegu Town, a settlement of about 70,000 people high on the Tibetan Plateau. Most of the residents in the town, located 1,200 miles from Beijing, are ethnic Tibetans who revere the exiled Dalai Lama, a native of Qinghai.

"The situation here is terrible. It's very cold. . . . I feel that half the people have died and half are injured," said Lamu, 21, a Tibetan reached by telephone in Jiegu Town, the hardest-hit urban area. "I'm scared. What can we do but sit in the open? Everything is buried. It's dark everywhere."

While locals complained of a shortage of food, tents for shelter and digging equipment, China's state media offered a more upbeat picture, describing rescue workers and medical staff as flooding into Qinghai from cities nationwide. State television reported that 900 people had been pulled from shattered buildings, including a student who was rescued from a flattened school in Jiegu Town after hours of digging.

But state media also provided far more than rigid propaganda. Liu Long, a correspondent for CCTV, China's state television network, reported live from the quake area for much of the day, giving vivid accounts of the devastation. In one particularly emotional report, he told of groans heard in the ruins of the Jiegu Monastery hotel. He also reported that only 350 tents had arrived by nightfall.

The blanket coverage reflected a desire on the part of China's leadership to show itself responsive to the suffering of ordinary people, as well as a recognition that old-style propaganda is not as effective today as it was during the era of Mao Zedong and for much of the past several decades.

While the Internet is heavily censored in this country, Web sites nonetheless buzzed Wednesday with skepticism about official accounts of the quake and its aftermath. Sina weibo, a Chinese equivalent of Twitter, which is banned in China, featured denunciations of the Seismological Bureau for not predicting the quakes, questions about whether structures that collapsed had violated building codes, and unconfirmed reports that the propaganda department of the Communist Party had banned all but selected Chinese journalists from visiting Jiegu Town.

Chinese are particularly sensitive to allegations that buildings were structurally unsound. Parents of children killed in the 2008 Sichuan quake -- in which more than 80,000 people died -- alleged that corrupt officials had allowed the construction of substandard schools. Unlike those schools, many of those that fell in Jiegu Town appear to have been traditional structures.

China's Earthquake Network Center put the magnitude of the strongest quake on Wednesday at 7.1, but the U.S.

Geological Survey estimated it at 6.9. Chinese authorities reported six quakes and aftershocks during a four-hour period that started with a relatively minor quake at 5:39 a.m.

Chinese media reported that a concrete dam at a water reservoir near Jiegu Town had fractures as a result of the quake and that many residents had left town for higher ground.

In a statement issued along with China's prime minister, Wen Jiabao, President Hu Jintao demanded "all-out efforts to save lives and provide assistance" and "efforts to safeguard social stability in the quake-devastated region," the official news agency Xinhua reported.

Passed over in silence was a message from the Dalai Lama, whom Beijing regularly denounces as a "splittist" bent on separating Tibet from China. In a message posted on his Web site, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader, who has lived in India since fleeing China in 1959, said he was "exploring how I, too, can contribute" to relief work.

"We pray for those who have lost their lives in this tragedy and their families and others who have been affected," he said.