

# At least 1,000 killed in Afghan quake, with fear toll will rise

June 22 2022, by Emmanuel PEUCHOT and Abdullah HASRAT

## Deadly earthquake in Afghanistan



AFP 

Map source: © Mapcreator.io/OSM.org/© MapTiler

Map showing the epicentre of a 5.9-magnitude quake in Afghanistan that hit in the early hours of June 22, includes relief map of surrounding region on the border with Pakistan.

A powerful earthquake jolted a remote border region of Afghanistan overnight killing at least 1,000 people and injuring 1,500 more, officials said Wednesday, with the toll expected to rise as desperate rescuers dig through collapsed dwellings.

The 5.9-magnitude quake struck hardest in the rugged east, where people already lead hardscrabble lives in the grip of a humanitarian crisis made worse since the Taliban takeover in August.

"People are digging grave after grave," said Mohammad Amin Huzaifa, head of the Information and Culture Department in hard-hit Paktika, adding that at least 1,000 people had died in that province alone.

He said more than 1,500 people were injured, many critically.

"People are still trapped under the rubble," he told journalists.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the global agency has "fully mobilized" to help, with UN officials confirming the deployment of health teams and supplies of medicine, food, trauma kits and emergency shelter to the quake zone.

The death toll climbed steadily Wednesday as news of casualties filtered in from hard-to-reach areas in the mountains, and the country's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, warned it would likely rise further.

The earthquake struck areas that were already suffering the effects of heavy rain, causing rockfalls and mudslides that hampered rescue efforts.

"It was a horrible situation," said Arup Khan, 22, recovering at a hospital in Paktika's provincial capital Sharan.

"There were cries everywhere. The children and my family were under the mud."

## **'Dire situation'**

Sharan Hospital director Mohammad Yahya Wiar said they were doing their best to treat everyone.

"Our country is poor and lacks resources," he told AFP. "This is a humanitarian crisis. It is like a tsunami."

Photographs and video posted on social media showed scores of badly damaged houses in remote areas. The UN humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan, Ramiz Alakbarov, told reporters nearly 2,000 homes are likely destroyed.

Footage released by the Taliban showed local residents of one village digging a long trench to bury the dead, who by Islamic tradition should be laid to rest facing Mecca.

The disaster poses a huge challenge for the Taliban, who have largely isolated the country as a result of their hardline Islamist policies—particularly the subjugation of women and girls.

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan's emergency response teams were stretched to deal with the natural disasters that frequently strike the country.

But with only a handful of airworthy planes and helicopters left since they returned to power, any immediate response to the latest catastrophe is further limited.

"The government is working within its capabilities," tweeted Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban official.

"We hope that the International Community & aid agencies will also help our people in this dire situation."

## Offers of help

The United States, whose troops helped topple the initial Taliban regime and remained in Afghanistan for two decades until Washington pulled them out last year, was "deeply saddened" by the earthquake, the White House said.

"President Biden is monitoring developments and has directed USAID (US Agency for International Development) and other federal government partners to assess US response options to help those most affected," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said in a statement.

The United Nations and European Union were quick to offer assistance.

"Inter-agency assessment teams have already been deployed to a number of affected areas," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Afghanistan said on Twitter.

In sending his condolences, UN chief Guterres noted how the tragedy is afflicting a nation mired in multiple crises.

"My heart goes out to the people of Afghanistan who are already reeling from the impact of years of conflict, economic hardship and hunger," he said in a statement.

Tomas Niklasson, EU special envoy for Afghanistan, tweeted: "The EU is monitoring the situation and stands ready to coordinate and provide EU emergency assistance to people and communities affected."

Neighbour Pakistan, where officials said one person was killed in the quake, said it would send emergency aid—including tents—across the border.

Afghanistan is frequently hit by earthquakes, especially in the Hindu Kush mountain range, which lies near the junction of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates.

Scores of people were killed in January when two quakes struck the western province of Badghis.

In 2015, more than 380 people were killed in Pakistan and Afghanistan when a 7.5-magnitude earthquake ripped across the two countries.

Afghanistan's deadliest recent earthquake killed 5,000 in May 1998 in the northeastern provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan.

From the Vatican, Pope Francis offered prayers for victims of the latest quake.

"I express my closeness with the injured and those who were affected," the 85-year-old pontiff said concluding his weekly audience.

Wednesday's quake occurred at around 1:30 am at a depth of 10 kilometres (six miles), some 47 kilometers southwest of Khost, according to the United States Geological Survey.

It was felt as far away as Lahore in Pakistan, 480 kilometres from the epicentre.

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