

Nepal hit by its worst earthquake in eight decades

By Julie Makinen, Los Angeles Times

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A powerful magnitude-7.8 earthquake hit Nepal on Saturday, collapsing historic buildings in the capital, Kathmandu. The quake — Nepal's most powerful in eight decades — tore apart highways and triggered avalanches on Mount Everest.

More than 3,000 people were killed, government officials said.

Residents reported seeing trails of destruction — collapsed walls, broken windows and fallen telephone poles — as they drove through the capital.

The earthquake struck just before noon local time, and its epicenter was 48 miles northwest of Kathmandu, home to 1.4 million people.

Trembling Lasted Several Minutes

The earthquake was most severely felt in the capital and the densely populated Kathmandu Valley. It also shook several cities across northern India, and was felt as far away as Pakistan, Tibet and Bangladesh.

Officials said the quake occurred at a depth of only 7 miles below the earth's surface, which is considered shallow. The closer the quake is to the earth's surface, the greater its destructive power. Witnesses said the trembling of the earth went on for several minutes.

A magnitude-6.6 aftershock hit about an hour later, and at least 20 other aftershocks followed the huge quake.

“This quake was so big,” said Prajana W. Pradham, who is helping to coordinate the emergency response for the CARE relief agency. “We’ve been feeling tremors for four hours. I just felt another big jolt.”

Kathmandu’s airport was closed, television and Internet services were disrupted, and phone and electricity lines were down.

Dharahara Tower Collapses

A number of historic buildings were severely damaged or destroyed, including Patan Durbar Square, which has many temples and Nepal’s ancient royal palace. The area is a UNESCO World Heritage site, a place the United Nations considers to be of great cultural importance. Dharahara Tower, a 200-foot-tall structure built in 1832, collapsed, trapping some people underneath.

Video from the scene showed people digging through the rubble of the collapsed tower, looking for survivors.

As the quake intensified, residents ran out of homes and buildings in panic, as clouds of dust began to swirl around them. Large cracks opened up on streets and walls.

Nepal Republic Media said an Indian Air Force plane carrying 40 rescue and medical workers and 3 tons of supplies arrived in Kathmandu.

Three other aircraft were sent from India, one of them carrying a mobile hospital, Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh said.

“There has been heavy damage in and around Kathmandu,” Singh said, adding that Nepal’s government asked for tents and blankets, as well as teams to search for survivors. On Sunday, he said, 10 helicopters would be sent for local rescues, medical transportation and food distribution.

Falling Bricks Injure Many

Nepal, a country of about 30 million people, is bordered by India to the southwest and China to the northeast.

Many structures in Nepal are made of brick or rubble and stone, and scores of people were injured in the quake by falling bricks.

The quake was of the same magnitude as the one that nearly destroyed San Francisco in 1906, and about 16 times more powerful than the magnitude-7 quake that devastated Haiti in 2010. A magnitude-7 quake is capable of widespread and heavy damage, while a magnitude-8 quake can cause tremendous damage.

In January 1934, a magnitude-8.2 quake struck Nepal, killing an estimated 10,000 people in Nepal and more than 7,000 in India. Much of Kathmandu was destroyed in that quake.

Though the extent of the damage and the scale of Saturday's quake have yet to be determined, it will likely put a huge strain on the resources of this poor country best known for Everest, the highest mountain in the world. The economy of Nepal depends heavily on money from tourism, mainly tourists who are drawn to Nepal for trekking and climbing the Himalaya Mountains.

Avalanches At Mount Everest

Javier Camacho Gimenez is a mountaineer and photographer who was at a base camp of Everest to attempt the ascent. He said that avalanches had buried some of the camps, including camps with Chinese and Japanese climbers.

He estimated that eight people had died and 40 were injured. "The situation in the Everest base camp is now chaos," he told a Spanish news agency. "Helicopters can not access the area due to bad weather."

Alex Gavan, a mountaineer, posted on Twitter that the quake triggered an avalanche about 5 miles west of Everest. "Huge disaster," he wrote. "Helped searched and rescued victims through huge debris area. Many dead. Much more badly injured." He posted that more would die if helicopters did not come to the scene immediately.

Ariani Soejeti, of the International Organization for Migration, said by phone that recently built structures in Kathmandu seemed to have survived. Severe aftershocks had continued after nightfall and people had been told to stay outdoors.

Nepal's government said roads were blocked, slowing rescues. Rain was forecast for Sunday, which could add to the misery of those whose homes were destroyed.