

Iranian earthquakes leave over 300 dead

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Two earthquakes struck the north-western provinces of Iran on Saturday, causing extensive damage and loss of life. Hundreds of rural villages have been levelled or badly damaged. The exact number of people killed remains unclear. Early reports placed the number of dead at 250, but by Monday the figure had been raised to more than 300. At least 3,000 people have been injured, with many still in a critical condition.

According to the US Geological Survey, the first quake struck at 3:53 p.m. local time, 60 kilometres north-east of the city of Tabriz, with a magnitude of 6.4. It was followed 10 minutes later by another earthquake, 48 kilometres north-east of Tabriz, with a magnitude of 6.3. More than 80 aftershocks—up to magnitude 5—have struck the region over the past few days.

The towns most severely impacted are Ahar, Harees and Varzaqan in East Azerbaijan province. More than 1,000 neighbouring villages were affected, with at least 20 villages destroyed and 250 suffering varying amounts of damage. Villages closest to the town of Varzaqan were the worst damaged, with many mud brick houses collapsing and trapping those inside, including women and children.

The north-western communities hit by the earthquakes are remote, with limited transport infrastructure making rescue and relief efforts difficult, and causing traffic jams on major roads. Shortages of water and food are being reported throughout the quake zone. Hospitals and emergency medical centres had large queues of people waiting for medical assistance. Many survivors received first aid at the disaster zones.

By Sunday evening, the Iranian authorities had suspended rescue operations, claiming that virtually everyone had been accounted for, and that the priority was to help the survivors. Local residents and emergency workers criticised the decision, pointing out that it was impossible for rescue workers to have reached all the remote villages.

One unnamed doctor told Reuters: “I know the area well. There are some regions where there are villages that you can’t even reach by car.” He added: “In the first hours after the quake, it was ordinary people and volunteers in their own cars going to the affected areas. It was more ordinary people helping out than official crisis staff.”

Reports further highlighted the difficult conditions facing survivors and the inadequacy of government disaster efforts. The Iranian Red Crescent has provided some aid, distributing food, 3,000 tents and requisitioning a stadium to house 16,000 people.

Abbas Fallah, a local parliamentarian, told *Mehr News*: “Despite the promises of officials, little first aid has been distributed in the region and most people are left without tents. If the

situation continues, the toll will rise.”

Deputy health minister Hassan Emam said injured people had been transferred to facilities outside the region because of concern that the local hospitals might collapse. Varzaqan has no major medical facilities, so an emergency centre had to be erected.

By Monday, the local media reported that 36,000 victims had been given shelter. A state grant of nearly \$1,000 per family has been approved, along with low-interest loans for up to \$6,000.

Offers of support have come from a number of countries, including Turkey, Russia and Japan. On Sunday, the White House issued a brief press release stating: “We stand ready to offer assistance in this difficult time.” US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Americans could donate food and medicine, yet concerns about possible penalties because of US economic sanctions on Iran remain a deterrent.

Moreover, US-led sanctions have helped drive up prices for basic goods, compounding the difficulties facing the quake survivors. Rescue helicopters had to suspend operations on Saturday night as sanctions have also prevented Iran from importing night-vision equipment. The export to Iran of any goods considered to have possible military applications is banned.

The Iranian response to outside aid has been mixed. The head of Iran’s Red Crescent, Abdolhossein Faghih, told a meeting of lawmakers: “We received offers of help from several countries ... but as we have sufficient men and resources we did not need this foreign aid. We thanked them for their offers.”

Vice-President Mohammad Reza Rahimi, however, stated: “In different situations, our country has helped those in need in other countries and under the current conditions, is ready to receive aid ... from different countries.” Iran was criticised for not accepting foreign aid following a 1990 earthquake in the Ghilan and Zandjan provinces, which left up to 50,000 dead.

The latest disaster is smaller than that in 2003, when a magnitude 6.6 earthquake levelled the city of Bam in eastern Iran. Nevertheless, it has exposed many of the same problems. The 2003 earthquake claimed over 26,000 lives and destroyed or damaged 85-95 percent of buildings. The extensive destruction resulted from the lack of quake-resistant buildings. Iranian seismologist Bahram Akasheh commented: “Nowhere in the world would a magnitude 6 earthquake kill so many people. There shouldn’t have been more than 10 injured.”

Most of those killed this week also lived and worked in antiquated mud-brick and concrete buildings, which are common in rural communities. The 2003 earthquake also revealed the lack of quake-resistant buildings in major towns and cities—the result of substandard construction. Despite calls for the enforcement of building codes, changes have been minimal. Many poorer Iranians have little choice but to continue using traditional and dangerous building designs.

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