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Climbers trapped on Mount Everest ‘are getting desperate’

ITANAGAR, INDIA — Helicopter teams began evacuating critically injured climbers at base camp at Mount Everest Sunday morning, but the effort came to an abrupt halt when a significant new aftershock triggered more avalanches and fears of additional casualties at the world’s highest peak.

Col. Rohan Anand, a spokesman for the Indian army, which had a mountaineering team training on Everest at the time of the disaster, said that the rescue effort has been hampered by communications difficulties and weather as well as the aftershock. The tremor occurred around 1 p.m. Nepal time and registered 6.7 on the Richter scale, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The army said that 19 had died at the Everest base camp Saturday after an enormous sweep of ice, rocks and snow tumbled toward the camp in an avalanche triggered by Nepal’s deadly earthquake, which has claimed more than 2,000 lives in the country so far. They rescued 61 climbers, mostly foreign tourists.

Dozens of climbers remain trapped on the side of the mountain at two camps that sit above where the avalanche fell, climbers said in tweets and posts on social media. Ropes and other equipment left in place to help them descend had been swept away in Saturday’s avalanche.

Daniel Mazur, a climber trapped at Camp 1, tweeted Sunday “Aftershock @ 1 pm! Horrible here in camp 1 Avalanches on 3 sides. C1 a tiny island. We worry about the icefall team below. Alive?”

A woman who was injured receives treatment at the Mount Everest base camp. (Azim Afif/European Pressphoto Agency)

Rescue helicopters had begun to land at the base camp — which is used by hundreds of climbers as the starting point for Everest ascents during peak climbing season — in the morning after the weather cleared and the sun peeped through the clouds. This gave rescuers an opportunity to ferry about 50 of the most critically wounded — climbers and sherpas, their Nepali guides — to safety.

Xinhua News Agency reported that more than 400 mountaineers on the north side of Mount Everest were safe, quoting the sports administration of Tibet. There was an avalanche near the north side of the North Col, but it didn’t hit any of them.

But the continued seismic activities halted rescue operations.

A Danish climber, Carsten Lillelund Pedersen, wrote in a Facebook message exchange with The Washington Post that the injured have been evacuated but that the dead remain.



Cellphone video shows survivors being rescued from Mount Everest base camp after Nepal’s worst earthquake in 81 years triggered a series of avalanches. (Reuters)

“It’s very tragic, we have many climbers and sherpas stuck higher up in camp 1 and 2. . . . And they are getting desperate,” he wrote in the message.

Another climber, Alex Gavan, tweeted that base camp had grown quiet, taking on the look of an aftermath of a nuclear blast, with “great desolation” and “high uncertainty” among those who remained.

More than 1,500 people can inhabit Everest base camp at any point during peak climbing season, including climbers, sherpa guides, porters and other staff, said Eric Johnson, a Montana emergency surgeon who sits on the board of Everest ER, which runs a clinic there. It’s difficult to know how many climbers are trapped on the mountain — or how many may have perished during the avalanche near or in its perilous Khumbu icefall, Johnson said. Sixteen sherpas were killed in an avalanche at Everest last year.

Dan Richards, the chief executive of the travel risk and crisis management firm Global Rescue, in Boston, said that his company has about three dozen mountaineering clients who had been near or around Everest at the time of avalanche. Six are unaccounted for, and eight remained trapped on the mountain in the camps above where the avalanche started.

“They’re up there. They’re well supplied, and they’re safe, but they’re not able to descend,” Richards said. They hope to be able to rescue the trapped climbers via helicopter as soon as circumstances on the ground permit, he said.

Mrigakshi Shukla in New Delhi contributed to this report.