

How to Save Stranded People on Mount Everest



Climbers look at the devastation after an avalanche flattened parts of Everest Base Camp

AFP/Getty Images

A Boston-based company that helped with the effort explains.

You can't just send rescuers up Mount Everest. The very height that drew the climbers to the mountains in the first place dramatically complicates efforts to save the stranded. Because of the height, responders flying in on helicopters had to be on supplemental oxygen.

"It's very hard to send lots of people for any extended amount of time to base camp unless they've hiked up there, and that takes a week," said Dan Richards, CEO of Global Rescue, a Boston-based firm that provides travel risk and crisis management to its members and is helping with the rescues.

At least 18 climbers were confirmed dead as of Wednesday after an avalanche caused by the earthquake that hit the region Saturday ravaged the south base camp on Mount Everest. An official for the State Department told the Associated Press that at least four Americans were killed. Dozens were injured.

The avalanche led to fractured legs, arms, backs, necks, and head injuries, according to Andy Fraser, a paramedic senior specialist for Global Rescue.

"For me, it's just heart-breaking for the sherpas, after last year."

Each year, Global Rescue sends a medical and rescue team to the Himalayan region for the climbing season, so its personnel were already in the region when the earthquake hit. The company began providing humanitarian assistance in Lukla, one of the primary airfields used by people climbing Everest.

"I was in Lukla at first light on Sunday morning, triaging sherpas and climbers being brought down from Everest," said Andy Fraser, a paramedic senior specialist for Global Rescue who was one of the company's employees in the region. "It was relentless, lasting approximately six hours, with helicopters constantly bringing in casualties. I triaged in the helicopters, and policemen stretchered the victims into the airport building, which we had commandeered and made into a field hospital."

Richards estimated company personnel handled 200 cases in the first 24 hours.

"The first step is a field rescue that begins with ascertaining the caller's condition and providing advice regarding how they should either shelter in place or move to a safer location," Richards said. "At that point we then deploy air or ground resources to try and reach them. Once they have been rescued from the field, we evaluate them medically and get them additional care if necessary. If not, we then bring them to a staging location prior to evacuating them from the country."

Company personnel are now in both Kathmandu and Lukla. Because the avalanche destroyed the route to base camp, everyone needed to be airlifted out, said Richards.

The company does two to three dozen rescues in the region each year, but the rescues over the last four days were complicated due to the strained infrastructure in the country and the scale of the event.

"The air is so thin that helicopters struggle to achieve enough lift to safely maneuver," said Richards of the ongoing evacuations. "To compensate for this, the helicopters have to reduce their weight, meaning they take fewer people. Sometimes it is only two people per trip. We estimate that more than 30 sorties were flown between camp 1, 2, and basecamp on Monday."

A Global Rescue spokesperson told Boston.com that while there are still climbers at the Everest base camp, there are no more climbers at camps 1 and 2 above basecamp. Rescued climbers have been tweeting about their experiences since the avalanche occurred.



Helicopters prepared for another rescue.

Courtesy of Global Rescue