

The New Zealand Herald

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Nepal earthquake: NZ climbing groups safe

A New Zealand guiding company's team have all been rescued by helicopter from the Western Cwm on Mt Everest, but 17 other people were stranded overnight at their high-altitude snow camp.

Wanaka-based Adventure Consultants said that now all its team was down from Camp 1 above the Khumbu Icefall, the next plan was for them to walk down valley to Lukla, a three-day trip.

New Zealand guide Russell Brice, of the Himalayan Experience, said from Kathmandu that the company's team of 25-plus Sherpas were safe and well at the Everest Base Camp.

However, the anxious family of American climber Patrick McKinley, told the Herald via Twitter that there are 17 climbers at Camp 1 awaiting helicopter rescue following Nepal's earthquakes which killed at least 18 people at the country's Everest Base Camp in an avalanche and rendered the route through the Khumbu Icefall too dangerous to descend on foot.

"Waiting - no food or fuel," Katherine McKnight said today.

Patrick McKnight, a university professor in Virginia, is climbing with the Summit Climb guiding outfit which has bases in the US and Britain.

Katherine McKnight posted online yesterday: "... just spoke to Pat. They're all packed up and waiting for the helis to come. I've been in constant contact with Global Rescue -- they know they're waiting and the plan is to get them out today [Monday] and at least down to base camp. But the choppers fly by Visual Flight Rules ... because they don't have the equipment to do otherwise. That means they can't fly if they can't see. And right now they can't see. We're waiting for a weather window to get them out."

Earlier yesterday, she wrote: "... everyone but the Summit Climb team has left. It seems a few different decisions were being made -- whether to climb down, whether to wait it out a bit because of rumours of chaos at Base Camp, and whether they could actually get on the flights because of their insurance policies.

"In the case of rescue, climbing insurance companies will send flights to pick climbers up. So they thought they needed to get on flights sent by their insurance, but here, that's not the case.

I spoke to Global Rescue (who have been fantastic) and they said these flights are all part of the government rescue, so anybody can get on them. So now Pat & his team know."

The Guardian newspaper reported yesterday that "as of Monday evening, about 15 climbers remained on the mountain."

Other guiding companies reported that at least 150 people were airlifted from Camp 1 yesterday. At least three helicopters - one said to be flown by Queenstown pilot Jason Laing - were doing 6 to 10 minute round-trip laps to Camp 1 while the weather held.

"It took four laps in Kiwi pilot Jason's B3 [helicopter] to get our team down," Dave Hahn, of US-based guiding company RMI Expeditions, wrote on his blog in describing the mass rescue which he referred to as "the great Everest Air Show".

He said there was a fear that climbers would cause chaos in a rush to get on the helicopters, but that didn't happen. "... [E]verybody seemed to understand the need



Mountaineers and Nepalese Sherpa guides evacuated from Everest Base Camp wait to board a rescue chopper to be flown to Lukla, in Pheriche, Nepal. Photo / AP

for superior social skills on this day."

Landing in the base camp was a shock, Mr Hahn said, despite having heard on the radio about the enormous airborne avalanche that had torn through the tent city on Saturday at around midday.

"We each walked slowly through the obliterated camps, stopping to understand how much force had bent this or that bit of steel.

"We finally understood the enormous death toll and the nature of the numerous injuries to the survivors."

Acting Prime Minister Bill English told Parliament that New Zealand stood with the international community in readiness to help.

"There is immense goodwill between New Zealand and Nepal based on our links through Sir Edmund Hillary and the ongoing work of the Hillary Trust.

"We have announced an initial contribution of \$1 million to the immediate relief effort, and we will continue to assess how we can further assist both in the short term and in the coming years. Because as we know from our own experience, recovery takes a long time."

Three consular staff had been sent to Kathmandu to provide assistance to New Zealanders, and the wellbeing of 236 Kiwis had been confirmed.

"On behalf of this House and all New Zealanders, I extend our condolences to Prime Minister of Nepal Sushil Koirala and the Nepalese people during this difficult time. We also offer our condolences to all of those affected in Bangladesh, China, India and Pakistan."

Acting Labour leader Annette King said the party's thoughts went out to the Nepalese people who had suffered after the earthquake, and to those of New Zealanders still missing in the country.

"I do believe there is more we could and should do, and I look forward to hearing what further contribution the Government will make. But, also, I urge New Zealanders to dig deep and donate whatever they can."

Mrigakshi Shukla in New Delhi contributed to this report.