

More than 2,100 confirmed dead in Afghan landslides

Nato and US offer troops' help as rescuers scramble in desperate search for survivors



At least 2,100 people were killed in massive landslides that struck a remote region of Afghanistan on Friday.

A spokesman for the governor in Badakhshan province, bordering Tajikistan, said on Saturday that 2,100 people had been confirmed dead after a village was buried in up to 100 metres of mud.

Villagers and a few dozen police, equipped with only basic digging tools, began searching for survivors at daylight on Saturday.

“People from surrounding districts of Badakhshan and Takhar have rushed to the area to help with the rescue,” Colonel Abdul Qadeer Sayad, a deputy police chief of Badakhshan, told Reuters.

Hundreds of mud-brick homes were destroyed when two landslides, triggered by torrential rain, smashed into Argo district village.

It is feared that another section of the mountainside could collapse as rescuers try to reach those trapped under the mud.

The Afghan military flew rescue teams to the area on Saturday because the remote mountainous region is accessed by narrow, poor roads that have been damaged by more than a week of heavy rain.

“We have managed to get one excavator into the area, but digging looks helpless,” Sayad said. “It is impossible to find signs of living creatures or houses in most parts of the affected area.”

The sheer size of the affected area, and the depth of the mud, meant only modern machinery could help in the rescue, he said.

Nato-led coalition troops are on standby to help, but on Saturday they said the Afghan government had not asked for help.

Hundreds of people were camped out in near freezing conditions. Some had been given tents and Afghan officials distributed food and water as best they could. Paramedics treated at least 100 people, in makeshift facilities inside a stable building.

Triggered by heavy rain, the side of a mountain collapsed into the village at about 11am (local time) on Friday when people were trying to recover their belongings and livestock after a smaller landslide a few hours earlier.

A spokesman for the Badakhshan provincial governor, Naweed Forotan, said more than 1,000 families lived in the village. “A total of 2,100 people – men, women and children – are trapped,” he said.

Rescue efforts have been hampered by difficult conditions because of rain. Seasonal rains and spring snow melt have caused heavy destruction in large tracts of northern Afghanistan, killing more than 100 people.

The US president, Barack Obama, said US forces were on standby to help.

“Just as the United States has stood with the people of Afghanistan through a difficult decade, we stand ready to help our Afghan partners as they respond to this disaster, for even as our war there comes to an end this year, our commitment to Afghanistan and its people will endure,” he said.

About 30,000 US soldiers are still stationed in Afghanistan, although that number is falling as Washington prepares to withdraw its troops by the end of this year after fighting the Taliban.

Afghan police said they had made a security ring around the area, which has been relatively free of insurgent attacks. In a statement, the Taliban said it was willing to provide security.

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