

Death toll in Bangladesh landslides reaches 137

14/06/2017 09:06 by admin

Dhaka: Bangladesh today launched a fresh rescue campaign as the death toll due to landslides triggered by heavy monsoon rains climbed to 137 with the majority of them reported in a remote hill district close to the Indian border. Southeastern hilly districts of Chittagong, Bandarban and Rangamati are the worst affected districts, officials said, adding that the toll will rise further as many are still missing under tonnes of debris in southeastern hills.

Officials confirmed 129 deaths but media reports put the toll as high as 137 in nearly three days' of torrential rains due to a depression in the Bay of Bengal which have triggered a series of landslides since Monday in the three districts.

"At least 129 people were found to have died so far while several remained missing as salvage campaign is underway," an official at the disaster management ministry control room told reporters.

He said some 4,000 people were moved to 18 government shelters as the landslides ravaged their homes and were exposed to the danger of getting buried in fresh mudslides.

Officials feared that the death toll could rise as rescuers find it difficult to reach remote areas where telephone and transport links have remained cut. With at least 20 landslides hitting it, southeastern Rangamati hill district was worst affected and resulted in 99 deaths, including four army personnel who were doing rescue operations.

Local people said a landslide pushed 15 army men down to around 30 feet, killing four instantly while a military spokesman in Dhaka said an army major and a captain were among four of their dead personnel.

He said the troops were called out to clear the landslide rubble from a highway linking port city of Chittagong with Rangamati.

"A fresh landslide at the scene buried the detachment killing the four while one soldier is still missing. Ten personnel were wounded in the (fresh) landslide," he said.

Many of the victims belonged to the ethnic minority or tribal groups who live in makeshift structures along the hills in Bandarban and Rangamati where power cuts and no road connection have enhanced miseries of the residents, officials said.

At least 27 deaths were reported from the port city of Chittagong which witnessed five landslides while the rest of the casualties were reported from neighbouring Bandarban district where the torrential rains triggered three landslides.

Authorities temporarily halted the rescue campaign at around 10 last night after recovering 129 bodies. Specialised teams of fire servicemen and troops were mobilised to launch afresh the salvage drive.

"We need to accomplish a crucial task of resuming Chittagong's road communications with Bandarban and Rangamati and Bandarban alongside salvaging the landslide victims," a Disaster Management official told reporters.

Densely populated Bangladesh is battered by storms, floods and landslides every rainy season but this year's rain is the worst since 2007 when landslides killed 127 people in the port city.

The incessant rains caused water-logging in many parts of Chittagong and submerged a number of coastal villages apart from triggering the landslides.

"The situation forced us to demolish a protection embankment against tidal surges as it appeared to be obstructing drainage inundating homes and roads," an official of the city corporation said.

Experts and environmentalists attributed the latest spell of landslides to illegal mining in hills which exposed them to quick erosion during rains. The three southeastern hill districts of Ragamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari known as Chittagong hill tracts

received over 300mm of rainfall in the 24 hours till yesterday.

Meteorologists said the port city of Chittagong alone experienced 222 mm of rainfall during the same period calling the huge quantum of downpour in such a short time to be unusual.

The landslides triggered by the monsoon rains came two weeks after Cyclone Mora hit Bangladesh, leaving eight people dead and damaging hundreds of homes.

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