

a galaxy of stars

[Independent Home](#) | [News](#) | [Sport](#) | [Argument](#) | [Education](#) | [Money](#) | [Independent Jobs](#)
| [Travel](#) | [Enjoyment](#)

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [World](#) > [Africa](#)

Death comes at dawn as quake strikes Morocco's Berber towns

By Elizabeth Nash in Madrid

25 February 2004

Killed as they slept: 560 die in Moroccan earthquake

Death comes at dawn as quake strikes Morocco's Berber towns

For the sleeping women and children and the aged in three isolated Berber towns Ait Kamara, Tamassint and Imzourn, where 30,000 people live in mud and stone homes Morocco's worst earthquake in more than 40 years spelt disaster.

"It's a real tragedy," said Mohammed Ziane, a former human rights minister from the port town of Al Hoceima, which is surrounded by the small towns. "Most people in this area are women, children and old people. The men leave for jobs in the Netherlands and Germany."

This is the worst earthquake to strike Morocco since 1960, when a quake in Agadir on the south-western coast destroyed the city, killing 12,000.

Yesterday, dawn broke over the towns to scenes of devastation. Dead and wounded were brought in to the main hospital in Al Hoceima all day yesterday, causing the tallies of dead and injured to leap hour by hour. "As soon as we think we've seen all the dead and hurt, more keep coming in ambulances," a doctor at the hospital said.

At a clinic, another doctor trying to deal with the flow described scenes of panic, and said: "I've never seen anything like it." Traumatized survivors set up tents beside their ruined houses and were preparing to spend the night under canvas.

King Mohammed cancelled his engagements to take command of the rescue, sending helicopters and teams of soldiers and civilians amid fears that the number of fatalities, mostly in poor areas where the mud-brick buildings were reduced to rubble, would continue to rise.

"I was asleep when I heard this terrible noise, like a roaring storm, as objects fell all round us," said Francisco Bravo, director of a Spanish school in Al Hoceima.

"It was traumatic. I ran into the street like everybody else. Everyone was very afraid because they remembered the earthquake here in 1994, and this one looks worse.

"The main square filled up with people, and many got into their cars to drive out of town to escape the danger, they thought. So there was a terrible traffic jam. Things calmed down as the day went on, but a lot of people will be too frightened to return home to sleep in their own beds tonight." Mekki Elhankouri, a physician at a hospital in Al Hoceima, told French television: "There is enormous damage. There were three-storey buildings that crashed to the ground and are crushed."

But Mr Bravo's area did not appear to be seriously affected, although he said cracks had appeared in the walls of his school, which would stay closed until a technician ruled it safe.

Six outlying villages, including Ait Kamra, Tamassint and Imzourn, between six and nine miles away, were worst hit. Hundreds of thousands live in the traditional mud-brick houses. Most deaths were reported in Ait Kamara, thought to be the epicentre of the quake, and it was said to be destroyed. In Imzourn, scores of homes were levelled, burying families as they slept.

Josephine Shields, a Red Cross representative in Tunisia, said: "We've been told the entire affected area has up to 400,000 people." She said victims needed blankets, warm clothing, food and water. "There is possibly a need for a field hospital because health services are saturated." Morocco's north-east is a remote and inaccessible region, cut off by the Rif mountains and crossed by narrow roads that snake through the Rif's rocky foothills. Atrocious driving conditions, worsened by almost impenetrable mist and rain, can make a 60-mile journey take hours.

Difficulty of access held up yesterday's rescue operation to the isolated hamlets that dot the craggy terrain. The northern Rif is Morocco's least developed, most neglected region. Adult males who cannot make a living from fishing or hashish trading head north to seek work in Europe, often making the crossing in fragile boats. The quake woke people in Melilla, Spain's Moroccan enclave 100 miles east, the nearest big urban centre. They said their rooms, doors, pictures, even their beds moved, but they reported no damage.

The Moroccan towns of Taza and Fez, south of the Rif, were also shaken. The impact was felt in the Spanish cities of Granada and Murcia and along the Mediterranean coast.

As far away as Gibraltar, people said they were woken by the crash of paintings falling from the walls and objects bouncing off their bedside tables. The fishing town and beach resort of Al Hoceima is a relatively tranquil oasis in a rugged, inhospitable region whose most profitable economic activity is the production of kif, or hashish.

Large areas west of the town are virtual no-go areas for the Moroccan authorities. Villagers cultivate fields of cannabis then prepare the blocks of resin for shipment across the Mediterranean to Irish and British dealers on the Spanish costa who sell it on. This is the source of most of Europe's cannabis, and is, overwhelmingly, the region's most profitable activity.

The Rif has always looked north, and not just because communications across the Mediterranean are easier than across the mountains to Morocco's southern cities. Berber and other northern tribes have long opposed the central government, which for decades has simultaneously oppressed and neglected them.

Nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s fought first the French, then, after Morocco won independence in 1956, they fought the central authorities in Rabat to establish an independent republic of the Rif, but they were savagely crushed.

These proud mountain people scorn their southern compatriots: *Dahilia*, they call them dismissively, "Those from the interior".

Now King Mohammed has the opportunity, with his handling of the tragedy, to heal long-festering wounds in a region where poverty and underdevelopment have driven hundreds of thousands to emigrate.

HISTORY OF DISASTERS

The last time a major earthquake hit North Africa was on 21 May last year. More than 2,300 people were killed and 10,000 injured after a tremor measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale devastated neighbouring Algeria near the capital Algiers.

In 1980 nearly 3,000 people were killed and 330,000 left homeless when a quake centred on the Algerian town of El-Asnam struck, registering up to 7.3 on the Richter scale.

Morocco's deadliest earthquake was on 29 February 1960, when 12,000 people were killed. The quake measuring 5.7 destroyed the southern city of Agadir on the south-west Atlantic coast.

Al Hoceima was near the epicentre of Morocco's last big earthquake, in 1994, which measured 5.5 on the Richter scale, but caused no fatalities.

Also in Africa

'I dug them out while the ground was still dancing. You can't win against such forces'

Nine Ugandans die in protests over rebel massacre

Killed as they slept: 560 die in Moroccan earthquake

Death comes at dawn as quake strikes Morocco's Berber towns

Moroccan earthquake kills hundreds