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

By Cahal Milmo in Ait Kamara

26 February 2004

Mahmoud Hatami pointed to two of the parallel heaps in the long line of fresh earth graves, each covered with branches ripped from the surrounding lavender bushes.

"This is where I buried my mother and father," he said. "I dug them out of their house while the ground was dancing. But you can never win against such forces."

The mud-brick village of Ait Kamara set in the lush ochre hills of north-east Morocco was mourning its newly buried dead yesterday. In one of dozens of new cemeteries that stretched out across a two-square-mile area of countryside, Mr Hatami and his neighbours had buried seven mothers, seven grandfathers and 10 children - aged from two to 12. The official death toll for the whole region remained at 564 but is expected to rise as rescuers reach outlying areas.

The rural community of Ait Kamara, which can only be reached along four miles of rutted and flooded track at points impassable to vehicles, was the epicentre of the earthquake that sent a terrifying pulse of energy measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale across the port of Al Hoceima and its surrounding villages and into the Mediterranean early on Monday.

The Independent was among the first outsiders to reach Ait Kamara yesterday as hundreds of people descended from the hills into Al Hoceima to demonstrate against a faltering rescue operation and to accuse the Moroccan government of abandoning its most impoverished region in its hour of need.

Hassan Hmidouch, leader of the town council in Imzouren, where two blocks of flats were among several dozen flattened buildings, said: "We need the world's help. It's a total disaster and that help appears to be coming from nowhere else." But for Mr Hatami, 34, a subsistence farmer who normally tends to his fields of broad beans, wheat and an almond grove, the events at 2.27am on Monday were still too raw to leave any room for anger.

Pointing to where the pile of red bricks, fashioned from mud, straw and animal dung, that was the home of his parents - Abdrahim, 72, and Fatima, 52 - he said: "I have no more tears. When it came, I knew straight away what was happening. The earth had turned liquid.

"My house was concrete and it survived but that of my parents, it was destroyed in moments. My brother and I pulled at the ruins but I knew my father and mother were gone. We buried them at sunset in the shadow of the mosque. We laid over lavender to stop the smell. This earthquake was an act of God, an act of a cruel nature."

Around him stood some of the grieving sons, brothers, aunts and nieces of Ait Kamara, a strung-out enclave of 6,000 people about 11 miles south of Al Hoceima at the foot of the Rif mountains. It is a wild region that has become a byword for rebellion by its indigenous Berber for centuries and produced a corresponding period of poverty and depression.

Mohammed Belchen, 31, who saw his seven nieces and nephews escape by a whisker as they dashed from the house moments before it collapsed, said: "The houses just folded like paper, killing everything inside - sleeping parents, children, cows, chickens and goats. Here we have lost 20 people."

Despite a mobilisation of Moroccan army, air force and navy, search teams supported by specialist rescue workers from France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands were struggling to reach several outlying villages last night, including Tamassint and Bin Hadifa, in the Rif mountains. An encampment of 400 Moroccan soldiers had begun digging in among the almond groves in the Ait Kamara area by yesterday evening. But it was in sharp contrast to the hundreds of paramilitary gendarmerie and police who flooded the area around Al Hoceima to coincide with a visit to the disaster zone by King Mohammed.

As a series of aftershocks, measuring up to 5.3 on the Richter scale and causing at least three further deaths, ran through the region, there were signs that the authorities were struggling to cope with rising discontent and panic. By nightfall, thousands of residents had abandoned their homes for makeshift tarpaulin shelters or the safety of their cars, parked away from any tall building.

The small hospital in Al Hoceima was struggling to cope and had to transfer those with less serious injuries to an adjoining barracks and hospice. The health ministry in the capital, Rabat, insisted that only 80 people remained under medical

supervision out of 300.

There was also concern that the authorities were being too swift to give up hope. One teacher, whose parents, three brothers and sister were killed in the village of Ait Abdelaziz, said: "They sent the military and they ordered us to stop digging." The Moroccan Red Crescent said it was still sending teams to search for casualties. It was also warning of the risk of disease arising from poor sanitation in the impromptu tent cities sprouting across the area.

One provincial official told *The Independent* that no further rescue teams were needed. He said: "The international rescue teams arriving now I am sure will be spectators." Such steadfast pronouncements served only to infuriate local people.

Abdel, his hands stained from digging in the rich red soil of Imzouren, said: "Where are the tents we need to keep dry? Where is the food we need to eat? Where is the water we need to survive? The government is doing nothing. We have buried our dead but what about those who still live?"

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