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## Moroccans take to streets to demand earthquake aid

By Cahal Milmo in Al Hoceima

27 February 2004

Protesters took to the streets of the Moroccan town at the centre of Monday's earthquake, as anger spread yesterday over the government's response to the disaster.

In a rare display of open dissent against the authorities, about 600 men, many of them from outlying villages destroyed or badly damaged in the tremor, marched on the regional governor's office in the north-eastern port of Al Hoceima to demand medical assistance, tents, food and increased international aid.

Demonstrators in the remote village of Bni Hadifa also blocked the main road between the disaster zone and the rest of the country for several hours, stopping military convoys and aid lorries. The Moroccan Red Crescent reported that up to 30,000 people had been made homeless by the quake and were sleeping outside in makeshift shelters at risk of exposure and disease.

The death toll from the quake, which measured 6.5 on the Richter scale, rose to 600 overnight as search teams continued to dig in the ruins of two collapsed apartment blocks in Imzourn, one of the most badly affected areas, about six miles east of Al Hoceima.

Unconfirmed reports from local officials said the final total of deaths in the region could be as high as 3,000 once more isolated areas affected by the disaster had been reached.

Hakim Allam, a 46-year-old farmer, who was one of the organisers of the demonstration, said: "The government isn't doing enough. I have walked 15km from my village. It is destroyed, but we have no tents, we have no bread.

"The army does not help. They do not know how to dig in the buildings, and yet our mothers, our sisters, lie underneath. We need more foreign help. We will do whatever it takes to make the authorities listen."

The protest, which was watched by riot police, came after a senior provincial official had insisted that no further international search teams were needed because there was little further hope of finding survivors. French, Italian, Algerian and Spanish units are already at the scene.

By yesterday afternoon, the rescue operation, involving several thousand troops and police, appeared to be still largely centred on Al Hoceima, where a camp for homeless refugees and a field hospital have been set up, staffed by 140 doctors and 370 nurses.

The Moroccan government accepted that it was having difficulty reaching some of the worst hit areas. The health ministry said at least part of the death toll was due to the poor weather conditions since the earthquake struck at 2.27am on Monday, leaving many roads to outlying rural areas blocked by landslips.

The Federation of the Red Crescent and the Red Cross said there was an urgent need for 1,500 tents, 30,000 blankets, 15,000 mattresses, and heaters and food. Markku Niskala, secretary general of the organisation, said: "The most urgent need at the moment is to provide the survivors with shelter and protect them from the cold." In the meantime, recriminations began about the apparent widespread flouting of construction regulations which require all new buildings since 1994 (the date of the last significant earthquake to hit Morocco, also at Al Hoceima) to be able to withstand a tremor of at least six on the Richter scale.

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