

QUAKE IN IRAN

Iran City No Longer Exists; Victims Hunted in Rubble

Quake Toll in Northeast Area May Reach 15,000; Tabas Destroyed in 90 Seconds; Disease a Threat

BY JOE ALEX MORRIS JR.
Times Staff Writer

TABAS, Iran—Abbas Abadini dug slowly into the rubble, tears streaming down his face. Somewhere, under the rubble that was once his home, lay his five children, victims of Saturday's devastating earthquake that took possibly 15,000 lives.

This scene was being repeated Monday all over this once prosperous trading city in remote northeast Iran, on the edge of the great salt desert and a historic point on Marco Polo's route to China.

The city simply does not exist anymore. It was wiped out in 90 seconds when the earthquake, recorded at 7.7 on the Richter scale, struck as the 12,000 inhabitants sat down to dinner. Aftershocks continued Monday.

Virtually all the buildings in this palm-fringed oasis were built of mud brick. All of them crumbled into instant rubble under the terrifying shock, burying alive three out of four of Tabas' inhabitants.

The only structures still standing are a few modern institutional buildings, such as the bank and two schools, which were built with fired brick and steel frames. In some of these buildings, even the windows are still intact.

But they are few. Most of the victims lie trapped under tons of debris and there is little, if any, hope for them.

The present danger is of disease and epidemics. It will be days, possibly weeks, before the rubble is cleared.

There is nothing but scenes of tragedy. Three brothers digging for their father broke down and threw their arms about each other, weeping.

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trapped on roof luggage racks.

It was the worst earthquake disaster in earthquake-prone Iran since 1968, when more than 12,000 persons died in Khorassan province, and this one may finally exceed that casualty total.

Local news agencies already have increased the death toll to 15,000, but Gen. Jaafer Sanieh, who is commanding relief efforts, is more cautious. He estimates that 70% of Tabas' population died—more than 8,000 persons. But the quake destroyed or damaged scores of towns and villages in the region, and altogether some 38,000 persons live in the stricken area. Reports are still sketchy on the total death count, particularly from outlying areas.

Local administration has broken down, so there is no body count other than a rough tally of corpses dug up and

unable to continue. Two pretty girls in traditional chadors (the long-flowing gowns still worn in the countryside here) lug a wooden trunk from what was their home.

They open it and take out a picture of their father, an air force captain, who was killed. Sixteen of 20 persons in their family perished, they said. Only a brother and the husband of one of them remained.

Another woman begs a truck driver to take the corpse of her husband to the cemetery. At the gravesite, cars and pickup trucks arrive constantly with more bodies, some of them

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buried, or waiting for a bulldozer at the cemetery to finish a shallow mass grave. Some 200 corpses are waiting on the field to be buried. The mayor was one of the victims.

Meanwhile, survivors are digging private graves and burying their dead as they find them. They carry corpses to the cemetery on makeshift stretchers, often a door from their destroyed homes.

The graves are shallow and simple, often marked only by a mud brick from the construction that collapsed on their heads. Makeshift graves have even been dug on traffic islands near the cemetery.

There is no panic, nor any apparent pressing need except for manpower to help dig for bodies. The army has brought in 1,000 soldiers equipped with trenching tools to help, but many more are needed.

Water supplies have been restored, a critical factor in the blazing desert heat. Electricity is expected back in operation by Wednesday, but there is little use for it.

Meanwhile, the stench of death is everywhere. Corpses lie waiting on the town's main square to be transported to the cemetery, beside survivors camped out in the garden there.

The Iranian air force is flying in food, and flying out casualties from a dirt airstrip next to the town. Emergency medical facilities have replaced two destroyed hospitals, and serious casualties are being flown out to Tehran and other cities.

A pretty 8-year-old girl named Sedera sat in a pickup truck. All of her family are dead. She was with her uncle, who lost all of his family, too.

More women and children camp out at what was the post office, surrounded by the few belongings they could salvage. All that remains of the post office is the sign.

Of one house, all that is left is a loom, and on it a half-finished carpet. Soldiers dig through the rubble, and a man comes up and gratefully presses the hand of a sergeant in charge. There is no antagonism here, unlike Tehran and 11 other cities placed under martial law as Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi tries to still the wave of political discontent sweeping his kingdom.

Iranians are coming in from far off to help. One youth has come from Meshed, some 200 miles away. Another man, Hussein Sanchoury, the mayor of Bourjnoud about 600 miles away, has brought 50 persons to help. He was born here.

"We need people to help," Abbas Safaie, the former mayor, said. "We could use 2,000 to 3,000 more."

Gen. Sanieh promised to bring in as many soldiers as were needed. But he said there were no problems with food or medical care. A makeshift red lion-and-crescent field hospital set up at the airport was working, but at a reduced capacity.

"The people here are helping themselves," the general said, "and for that we must be thankful."

But many obviously were still too shocked to be of much help. They squatted in the rubble of their former homes, their faces devoid of expression, as soldiers dug into the debris.

And there is still fear. Another tremor hit the town Sunday, but there is little left to fall down.

For the present, this once thriving town is but a name on the map. And a heap of rubble and the stench of death.

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Iran Quake Leaves 11,000 Dead, 40 Towns in Ruins

Only 2,000 in City of 12,000 Survive 7.7 Shock; Death Toll Rising as Bodies Are Pulled From Rubble

TEHRAN, Iran (AP)—A devastating earthquake that struck a farming region of northeast Iran Saturday killed more than 11,000 people and destroyed entire cities and villages, the official Pars news agency reported Sunday.

The quake, which U.S. seismologists measured at 7.7 on the Richter scale, was the most powerful in re-

cent Iranian history, the Tehran Geophysics Institute reported. U.S. scientists said it was the strongest quake in the world so far this year.

The news agency said only 2,000 of the 12,000 people who lived in the town of Tabas survived, and most of those were seriously injured. Tabas and surrounding villages were at the epicenter of the quake, 400 miles southeast of Tehran.

The agency said 40 villages in the area were demolished and 60 others were damaged severely. Iranian national radio and television reports said at least 80% of the town of Firdaus, about 100 miles east of Tabas, was destroyed and "many" people were killed or injured.

Officials said they feared the death count would rise much higher as reports come from outlying villages.

An aerial view of Tabas broadcast on national television late Sunday

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IRAN QUAKE DEATHS

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showed the town was leveled, with only palm trees and half a dozen buildings, including a domed mosque, left standing.

"Tabas has become a mound of rubble, bent iron beams and dirt," one eyewitness was quoted as saying. The city, on the edge of Iran's central desert, is an agricultural center noted for its dates, grains and oranges.

"From each family, only one person has survived," said another witness.

Rescue teams Sunday were still recovering bodies—and some survivors—from the debris of leveled towns. Officials said they feared the midday heat and the cold at night would make it difficult for those trapped in the rubble to survive.

A radio announcer reporting from Tabas wept as she described the destruction.

The quake, which was felt in two-thirds of the country and shook buildings in the capital city, occurred at 7:38 p.m. local time Saturday.

The quake also was felt in the major cities of Isfahan, Kerman, Rafsanjan and in many other towns and villages on the edge of the Kaveer Desert, officials said.

An official in Firdaus told a Radio Iran reporter that the residents of the town were fortunate that the quake hit early in the evening while many were still outside their homes.