

UAVs look for survivors as new landslides, rain hamper rescue

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Army teams struggle to reach Badrinath-Harsil; 10,000 stranded pilgrims yet to be evacuated

Search and rescue efforts to evacuate 10,000 stranded pilgrims in Uttarakhand were hampered by heavy rain and landslides on Monday as rescue teams struggled to reach Badrinath and Harshil axis. The weather, as predicted by the Met department, even grounded big Army choppers affecting air evacuation operation.

The weather wasn't cooperating with rescuers who tried to use the repaired road. Heavy rain triggered two landslides between Rudraprayag and Guptkashi on Monday morning blocking the vehicular movement and evacuation plan to bring the stranded by foot was suspended. Meteorological Department said the moderate rainfall will continue at several locations in the state till June 29. Chamoli district is likely to receive heavy rainfall on Tuesday and Thursday while Uttarkashi will be under severe weather on Tuesday and Wednesday. Badrinath, Harshil, Gaurikund and Guptkashi, the critical areas, will be severely affected by foul weather.

State officials said till Monday evening a total of 95,000 stranded pilgrims have been evacuated from Rudraprayag, Chamoli, Uttarkashi, Tehri and Pithoragarh. Around 500 people are still stuck at Gaurikund and the Army operation to bring them to safety was suspended following heavy rain in the area. The state government has deployed more than 1,000 public transport vehicles for taking the rescued people to their hometowns.

"The number of stranded people could be more than 10,000 as we will have to scan other critical areas for survivors. We are also trying to find out survivors in the villages as all the villages in Kedar Ghati were lost," officials said.

Indo-Tibetan Border Police on Monday deployed Netra UAV for search and rescue operations in the remote areas of Kedarnath, Bhairav Chatti and Jungle Chatti scanning for survivors.

ITBP DG Ajay Chadha said ITBP personnel also combed the Bhairon Chatti area and ensured that there are no survivors stranded there. "We have ordered two more Netra UAVs from the manufacturers and expect to deploy them once the weather is clear," Chadha said.

He said the weather was expected to improve by Friday and in the meantime personnel on the ground are trying to evacuate those stranded through repaired roads. The ITBP team has already repaired the damaged roads from Badrinath to Hanuman Chatti which is now being used for rescue operations.

Total bodies recovered by NDRF and ITBP personnel who are combing the area reached 525. The bodies were handed over to the local police for identification and last rites. Forest department was asked to arrange 50 tonne of wood and ghee for the last rites of victims at Kedarnath site on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna said those who are still stranded are safe and there is no threat to their life.

"There are people stranded in Badrinath and Harsil but they are being provided food and water as soon as weather is clear, they will be evacuated," he said.

Bahuguna also said that approximately 40,000 sq km of area is affected by flash flood and landslides which damaged roads, electricity and water supply.

“We are trying to restore the necessary services,” he said.

The water supply schemes of Chamoli in Badrinath, Pandukeshwar, Govindghat, Ghanghria, Joshimath, Gopeshwar, Karnaprayag and Gauchar have been temporarily restored. The state government has also deployed a team of 150 doctors and 2,500 paramedics in the affected areas for immediate medical attention to the injured.

By Monday evening, the BSNL was able to restore all its towers except four mobile towers in Kedarnath, Dharchula, Augustya Muni and Narayan Bagar.

The Centre, in a statement, said 75 satellite phones are being used to connect with far-flung areas and 25 are being imported from Hong Kong for use by the agencies involved in rescue work.

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