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Landslide washes away Pune village, 17 killed, 200 trapped

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Pune: At least 17 people were killed and 200 feared trapped as 44 houses in Malin village in the Ambegaon tehsil of Pune district were flattened by a landslide that hit early Wednesday morning after torrential rain. Among those trapped were 60 women and 60 children, officials said, adding that they feared the death toll would go up.

Though the landslide occurred at 4am, the news reached the district administration only after several hours as the village is part of a remote tribal belt, said Dilip Walse-Patil, Speaker of the legislative assembly and legislator from the area who visited the spot on Wednesday. The village, located close to the backwaters of the Dimbhe dam, is 30 km from the famous Bhimashankar temple and 75 km from Pune.

Seven teams from the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) were rushed to the spot but the hilly terrain, narrow access road, heavy rain and mountains of slush and mud created logistical problems in reaching those affected.

By late Wednesday, the NDRF had rescued eight villagers and pulled out 17 bodies from the debris. The injured were taken to the sub-district hospital at Manchar and Sassoon General Hospital in Pune.

The village has a population of around 715, chief minister Prithviraj Chavan said, and 60-65 houses. Most of the locals are tribals.

"Most houses have been swept away," said Rajendra Rakshe, resident of a village nearby. However, many of Malin's locals have got jobs in Pune and Mumbai and survived because they were away, he said.

"Everything on the mountain came down," said Suresh Jadhav, a district official.

Environmentalists said large-scale deforestation had made the place vulnerable. Landslide expert Satish Thigale, who has studied the Bhimashankar area, said, "The root cause of the landslide appears to be levelling of land on the hill for cultivation and uprooting of trees."

Rescuers planned to work overnight using floodlights mounted on two jeeps along with earthmoving vehicles, according to Jadhav.

The rescuers were moving the machinery slowly in order to avoid causing any harm to any possible survivors, Pune collector Saurav Rao said.

Walse-Patil said around 40 doctors and 70 nurses had been pressed into the rescue operations. Twenty-eight ambulances of the Maharashtra emergency medical service had also been sent.

The NDRF teams also comprise doctors and para-medics, besides personnel trained as medical first responders. These teams are carrying state-of-the-art rescue equipment and communication sets. In addition, two unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have been deployed for assistance.

Nivrutti Amonkar, a senior citizen from a neighbouring village, said most residents of Malin village had moved there after their land had been taken over for construction of the Dimbhe dam. There had never been such a calamity in the region in the past, he said.

The spot was known to get heavy rainfall, Amonkar added, but the rain on Tuesday was extraordinary, he said. "The villagers, who cultivate rice, were in the middle of the farming season. Most of them had come home after a hard day's work and were in deep sleep when tragedy struck," said Dagadu Dotare, another resident of a nearby village.

Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh will visit the spot on Thursday.

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"Environmentalists said large-scale deforestation had made the place vulnerable. Landslide expert Satish Thigale, who has studied the Bhimashankar area, said, "The root cause of the landslide appears to be levelling of land on the hill for cultivation and uprooting of trees." "Nivrutti Amonkar, a senior citizen from a neighbouring village, said most residents of Malin village had moved there after their land had been taken over for construction of the Dimbhe dam. There had never been such a calamity in the region in the past, he said." The answer to such calamities lies here above. The efforts of NDRF are commendable. But the cost involved in the first choice of not devastating Nature and the second post reaction be better calculated by economists/environmentalists/govt authorities.

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