NZ quake closes schools

More than 100 schools in Christchurch, the second-biggest city in New Zealand (NZ), and across the surrounding Canterbury region reopened just over a week after an earthquake measuring a magnitude of 7.1 on the Richter scale shook the area on 3 September.

NZ Secretary for Education Karen Sewell said the school closures were in the best interests of safety and continued assessment of school property. ‘This allows more time for structural assessment of school buildings and grounds,’ Sewell said.

NZ Minister for Education Anne Tolley told the NZ Herald’s Michael Dickison relocated students and staff from the same schools would be kept together as much as possible. ‘The priority is to get as many schools open as safely and as quickly as we can. There are a number of schools now that we can’t get open..., there’s no way that they can,’ Tolley said. ‘It’s heartbreaking it really is. We have to make other arrangements for the children, including relocation.’

The NZ Ministry of Education is assisting school leaders and teachers in dealing with traumatised children. ‘The schools have many traumatised staff as well,’ Tolley said. ‘We have to take this slowly and carefully.’

Aftershocks measuring a magnitude of 4.5 and 4.6 on the Richter scale continued in the region for several days.

Flood devastation hits Pakistan

AFTER CATASTROPHIC FLOODING, PAKISTAN FACES A SLOW RECOVERY, REPORTS STEVE HOLDEN.

Catastrophic monsoonal flooding along the Indus River affecting Pakistan’s Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh provinces as well as parts of Baluchistan province in August killed more than 1,600 people, destroyed the homes of two million people and disrupted the lives of another 14 million people, or eight per cent of the population.

The massive scale of the catastrophe has tested Pakistan’s government, which has been criticised for its slow relief response, but in fairness the scale of the disaster has taken everyone by surprise, and relief efforts have been hampered by the collapse of infrastructure. Many bridges and roads have been destroyed, and severe weather in August kept helicopters on the ground. As

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reinforced its office in Islamabad with experts from its other areas of action, notably education, to work with United Nations (UN) partners to evaluate what needs to be done to get children back into classes as quickly as possible.

UNESCO’s early estimates were that 5,457 schools had been damaged or destroyed, 4,419 of them in Punjab and Sindh. At least one million school children were affected by the floods. Most schools have become makeshift shelters, putting education in doubt for the rest of the school year that began in August.

The government of India vowed to offer all possible assistance, beginning with USD5 million in aid after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh spoke with Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani in August. ‘We are willing to do all that is in our power to assist Pakistan in facing the consequences of floods,’ Hardeep Singh Puri, India’s Envoy to the UN told the UN General Assembly on the second day of a special meeting on the floods in August. Also at the UN, Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi accepted the offer of aid.

Western media, however, criticised Pakistan’s government for alleged corruption, ‘political posturing’ and ignoring the plight of the flood victims. Writing in the Vancouver Sun and Toronto Star, Craig and Marc Kielburger, co-founders of the Free the Children charity, accused Pakistan’s government of ‘gauging global response before accepting USD5 million from its rival India.’

According to Hasnain Kazim, reporting for Der Spiegel, urban centres that have escaped the flooding have swollen into refugee camps, where schools have become centres for emergency relief efforts. Kazim visited a makeshift shelter for 500 refugees at Government Muslim High School, in the city of Multan in Punjab province. ‘There are no signs at this school of people who are dispirited and ready to fall into the arms of Islamist extremists, as some articles in Western newspapers have reported,’ he wrote. ‘And the usual allegations that the government is corrupt and does little also has little traction with the people in the shelter.’

The fear now is of a rising death toll from waterborne diseases that are expected to hit children hardest. Cholera outbreaks have been reported in Khyber-Pakistan province, and experts say flood waters contaminated by faeces will lead to the spread of fatal diarrheal disease.

LINKS: To make donations, visit www.pakistan.com.au

A 2007 World Health Organisation Pakistan: Flood Hazard Distribution Map, shown with the disputed area cross hatched, predicts high and very high flood risk areas, shown in orange and red respectively, along the Indus River. August’s flooding into eastern parts of Baluchistan province is more severe than the WHO map predicts.