

Tens of thousands evacuated after China quake kills 19

BY AFP

CHENGDU. China yesterday evacuated tens of thousands of people in its mountainous southwest after a strong earthquake killed at least 19 people, rattling a region where memories of a 2008 seismic disaster remain fresh.

The 6.5-magnitude earthquake struck Sichuan province late on Tuesday, tearing cracks in mountain highways, triggering landslides, damaging buildings and sending panicked residents and tourists fleeing into the open.

Thousands of people, many of them tourists at a popular national park near the epicentre, were being evacuated to safety yesterday after spending a nervous night out in the open as more than 1,000 aftershocks rippled across the region.

The area's difficult geography -- and travel restrictions quickly imposed by authorities -- have so far prevented a clear picture of the scale of the disaster from emerging, but there were no reports of catastrophic damage or large-scale casualties by yesterday afternoon.

The quake killed at least 19 people and injured at least 247, 40 of them seriously, according to the local government of Aba prefecture where the epicentre was located.

Images on social media or in state news outlets showed cars and buses tossed into ravines or crushed by giant boulders jolted loose from surrounding hills, and rescue personnel combing through rubble for any victims.

Aerial footage broadcast by state-run *Xinhua* news agency showed picturesque green-forested

mountains now scarred by huge gouges from giant landslides that sent clouds of dust into the air.

The quake's epicentre was near Jiuzhaigou, a national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site famed for its karst rock formations, waterfalls and lakes.

247

Injuries. The number of people injured by the earth quake.

Xinhua said at least five of the deaths occurred there, and that more than 30,000 people had been evacuated from Jiuzhaigou alone.

China's official earthquake monitoring agency said more than 1,000 aftershocks had been detected, the most powerful

reaching magnitude 4.8 yesterday morning.

More than 2,000 kilometres to the northwest, a 6.3-magnitude tremor shook the far-western border region of Xinjiang on Wednesday morning, according to the US Geological Survey.

The Xinjiang quake, which was followed by aftershocks of 5.2 and 5.3 magnitude, injured 32 people and damaged more than 1,000 homes, *Xinhua* said.

President Xi Jinping called for "all-out efforts to rapidly organise relief work and rescue the injured" in the Sichuan quake.

Hundreds of soldiers and rescue personnel had been deployed to the Jiuzhaigou area, along with hundreds of vehicles, and dozens of sniffer dogs and devices used to detect life underneath rubble.