

Quake toll may reach 2,000



KHABAROVSK, Russia (AP) — Some alive, some surely dead, thousands of people lay buried Monday in the ruins of an oil town flattened by an earthquake on remote Sakhalin island in Russia's Far East.

Forty-eight hours after Neftegorsk collapsed as its 3,000 residents slept, rescuers had found 938 survivors and about 300 bodies. Officials feared the death toll could surpass 2,000.

Rescuers honed in on moans and cries from under the piles of brick and concrete that once had been five-story Soviet-built apartment blocks, noted for their poor construction.

"When the sun sets and the rescue equipment stops, the town starts moaning," Russian television reported. "These are the moans of those buried under the rubble."

Witnesses said Neftegorsk collapsed in less than a minute.

One man hacked himself free with a small saw, then dug out his daughter with the saw and his hands. "I saw my daughter's hand and heard her voice: 'Daddy, I'm here.' It took me three hours to get her out," he told NTV television.

Authorities rushed relief supplies, field hospitals and at least 500 rescue workers to Neftegorsk aboard helicopters and small planes and dispatched an ice-breaker to clear a path for a hospital ship. The nearest airport that can accommodate large car-

go planes is 400 miles away in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and fog and poor roads make it a grueling trip.

"We are racing against time, against hours and minutes," said Sergei Khetagurov, deputy minister for emergency situations. "Rescue work can help save victims only in the first two or three days. After that, there is no one left to save."

Sergei Shoigu, Russia's minister for emergency situations, told the ITAR-Tass news agency he expected the death toll to surpass 2,000. He said 300 bodies had been found.

Shoigu said it would take at least two weeks to clear the rubble.

The magnitude 7.5 quake struck the island at 1:03 a.m. Sunday (9:03 a.m. EDT Saturday).

"The whole town collapsed," Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin said. "If this had happened in daytime, there wouldn't have been so many deaths."

Bodies lay on the ground under blankets and cloth scraps Monday and limbs poked out of the rubble as cranes plucked concrete slabs from mountains of debris. Stunned survivors combed through ruins or examined lists of the dead.

Some wept. Others simply stared off into space.

"Buildings collapsed like a house of cards. One man saved his family by pushing his wife and children out a second-story window," a Russian television correspondent said from the scene.

Viktor Gurevich, vice governor

of the Sakhalin region, said at least 300 people had been hospitalized, many in critical condition. Doctors said they would have to amputate many survivors' crushed arms and legs.

The injured were being taken from Neftegorsk to hospitals in the regional center of Okha and to Khabarovsk, about 500 miles away on the Russian mainland. Some were taken to Vladivostok, 900 miles away on the mainland.

It was one of the strongest earthquakes in Russia's history, and the worst in the former Soviet Union since a 1988 earthquake in Armenia killed at least 25,000 people. President Boris Yeltsin planned to address the nation Tuesday and cancel Independence Day festivities on June 12 as a mourning gesture.

The quake was centered offshore near Sakhalin's thinly populated northern tip. Neftegorsk was 40 miles northwest of the epicenter.

News reports said the tremor destroyed about 20 five-story brick buildings which dated from the 1960s, when Soviet construction was especially shoddy. Only a few smaller buildings remained standing.

Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets called the decision to build a town in such an active earthquake zone "ill-considered" and Construction Minister Yefim Basin said Neftegorsk would not be rebuilt.

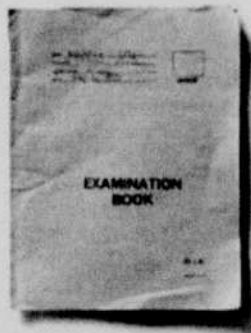
Soskovets said oil workers would be brought in from the mainland from now on.

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