Portable ATMs, phone-charging in China quake zone

GILLIAN WONG, Associated Press

LUSHAN, China (AP) — The tent village that sprang up in two days to house quake survivors in mountain-flanked Lushan is no ordinary refugee camp. China's full range of disaster response is on display: Trucks with x-ray equipment, phone-charging stations, bank tellers-on-wheels — even a tent for insurance claims.

The efforts under way Monday in mountainous Sichuan province after a quake Saturday that killed at least 188 people showed that the government has continued to hone its disaster reaction — long considered a crucial leadership test in China — since a much more devastating earthquake in 2008, also in Sichuan, and another one in 2010 in the western region of Yushu.

"Lushan was so heavily hit and my family's house toppled. It has been such a disaster for us," said Yue Hejun, 28, as he waited to recharge his family's three mobile phones at a charging stall, volunteered by a communications company and coordinated by the government in a new addition to the arsenal of services after natural disasters. "If we can charge our phones, we are at least able to keep in touch with our family members outside and that helps to set our minds at ease."

At a mini-clinic with two green cots in the open air and a small tent for doctors to sleep, a doctor said the government has learned the importance of fast coordination since the Yushu quake, which killed more than 2,600 people. Much of the initial relief in that disaster came from Buddhist monks and other non-government volunteers, partly because of the remoteness of much of the affected areas.

"After 24 hours or 48 hours in Yushu, things were not so orderly or settled in," said

the doctor, who like many government officials would give only her surname, Luo. "The government's quick, organized response is very important. It's no use to blindly come here and try to save people."

Helicopters have been an obvious presence in the latest rescue efforts, used to reach outlying communities, unlike in 2008 when bad weather hampered their use in the critical first 36 hours. This time, better use of helicopters for reconnaissance — with remote sensing technology — and for the distribution of aid has allowed help to get out more quickly to where it is needed, said Teng Wuxiao, director of the Institute of Urban Public Security at Fudan University in Shanghai.

Still, complaints were common among the survivors of the latest quake, especially in the more hard-to-reach areas. While aid was being delivered, it was not getting out to all who need it. Yue said family members in his remote mountain village had received no help with shelter and were living under tarpaulins.

Huang Mingxian, 47, who was camped out with seven family members in a government-issued blue tent in a small public square, said the government's efforts were appreciated but that supplies were not always distributed fairly.

"This morning is the first time in three days that we have gotten instant noodles," Huang said, waving a pair of long chopsticks she was using to stir the noodles in a wok over a gas canister-powered mobile stove. "Other areas have electricity and water, what about us?"

Earlier Monday, about two dozen residents briefly gathered on a street corner near a camp area, shouting that they had not been given food in two days. A half-hour later, a large truck rolled up and dozens of evacuees ran up to it, jostling as the supplies were being handed out.

The death toll in Saturday's quake — measured at magnitude 7.0 by Chinese authorities and at magnitude 6.6 by monitors in the U.S. — may continue to tick upward, with about two dozen people still missing. More than 15,000 people have been sent to hospitals, with more than 300 of them seriously injured.

Central authorities' ability to respond to natural disasters has been seen as tests of legitimacy for centuries. Chinese emperors put state resources into controlling floods, and earthquakes and other disasters were believed to be signs that a dynasty was losing the "mandate of heaven."

The state-run tabloid Global Times boasted in an editorial of China's communal "disaster-relief" culture, and its "more mature" response to the latest quake, comparing it favorably to those overseas. "In its ability to mobilize people and in other indicators, China's disaster relief comes ahead of the United States, Japan and other developed countries," the newspaper said.

The Foreign Ministry said that Beijing is turning away foreign offers of assistance, saying China is capable of handling it on its own.

In Lushan county's town, where many of the buildings are unsafe for use, the grounds of schools, hospitals, a gymnasium and other government buildings have been converted into evacuee camps. Quake survivors formed long lines in front of trucks and stalls to receive instant noodles, bottled water and other supplies.

Beyond the bare necessities, there are also stalls for survivors to make insurance claims, a large vehicle that converts into a bank and ATM-on-wheels, and tents sponsored by Chinese telecoms companies providing numerous electrical extension cords for residents to recharge their electrical gadgets.

High school seniors in the disaster area will be moved this week to the provincial capital, Chengdu, along with 30 teachers so that they can continue classes and take the all-important university entrance exam, the state Xinhua News Agency reported.

As typically happens after disasters, Chinese with cars were packing them with supplies and heading to the disaster area. Anticipating traffic congestion that could hamper emergency teams, the government issued a notice Monday asking volunteers, tourists and others not trained as rescuers to stay out of the disaster area.

However, authorities were letting motorcyclists through.

Peng Song, 28, an outdoor equipment retailer who biked to Lushan from the provincial capital of Chengdu, had his motorcycle packed with tents and bottled water and was riding with 14 other bikers-turned-volunteers out to remote communities.

"Those in the disaster area need help. We just want to offer a hand to them, that's all," Peng said.

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