

FOCUS-At least nine dead in severe India quake.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

435 words

29 March 1999

07:16

Reuters News

English

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NEW DELHI, March 29 (Reuters) - At least nine people died in two north Indian towns hit by a severe cluster of earthquakes early on Monday, police said, and more casualties were expected as news trickled in from the remote mountainous region.

The first powerful earthquake measured 6.8 on the open-ended Richter scale, officials said.

It appeared to be the strongest to hit the seismically sensitive Himalayan foothills in 94 years. In April 1905 an earthquake estimated at 7.2 on the Richter scale killed thousands in the state of Himachal Pradesh.

"There were six aftershocks after the first earthquake at 12.35 a.m. (1935 GMT)," S.K. Srivastava, a senior official at the Indian Meteorological Department told Reuters by telephone.

Srivastava said the aftershocks ranged between 2.4 and 4.9 on the scale.

He said the epicentre was in the Chamoli and Garhwal districts of Uttar Pradesh state.

"Five prisoners in Chamoli town died when the police station they were detained in collapsed around them," Chamoli police superintendent Sridhar Pathak told Reuters by telephone.

Pathak said three more people were killed by a crushed house in the nearby town of Gopeshwar in the Garhwal foothills of the Himalayas. A ninth person died in another neighbouring town.

"The (worst) damage area will be at least 50 km (30 miles) in radius," Srivastava said. "The impact was felt even in peripheral areas about 500 km distant."

A senior police official in the district of Uttar Kashi told Reuters the tremor was severe.

"It is difficult to assess the damage but in some distant places even radio and telephone communications have been cut off by the earthquake," he said.

Officials contacted by telephone said more casualties were expected as rescuers started to travel by road to the region.

P.K. Mohanty, the top official in Dehra Dun district in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, said he had received one early report of a collapsed house.

Residents in the Indian capital New Delhi were jerked awake by two strong tremors. Furniture swayed and windows rattled.

A seismological official in the western city of Bombay said the earthquake struck about 1,350 km (850 miles) to the north. Another official in New Delhi said it hit at latitude 30.2 degrees north and longitude 79.5 degrees east.

The United News of India news agency said the earthquake was felt in several north Indian towns and two tremors rocked the city of Chandigarh, capital of the state of Punjab.

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