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7 killed after 'glacial burst' in Uttarakhand

Over 125 missing as hydel projects under construction on Rishiganga, Dhauliganga rivers are swept away

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Seven persons were killed and over 125 reported missing after a "glacial burst" on Nanda Devi triggered an avalanche and caused flash floods in Rishiganga and Dhauliganga rivers in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand on Sunday.

The number of missing persons could rise as details were still being ascertained, Uttarakhand Chief Minister T.S. Rawat said at a press conference in Dehradun in the evening.

Videos of gushing waters and rising dust went viral on social media as flood warnings were issued in downstream Uttar Pradesh for what was described as a "glacial burst" by the Centre's National Crisis Management Committee (NCMC), headed by Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba.

Cause under study

Mr. Rawat, on his part, was more circumspect about the cause of the flooding in the eco-sensitive Himalayan region, where environmentalists have warned against the construction of dams for decades. "Experts will tell us about the cause behind the



Narrow escape: A worker being rescued from a tunnel at the Tapovan hydel project, which was washed away after the glacial burst in Uttarakhand on Sunday. *SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

disaster," the Chief Minister told reporters. At least 15 persons had been rescued till Sunday evening, Uttarakhand Director-General of Police Ashok Kumar said in a tweet. "Rescue operations are going on," he stated.

Mr. Kumar said seven bodies had been recovered so far and around 100 people were still missing. The missing persons include two policemen and five villagers, he said. He said work on the

900 m-long Tapovan tunnel of the NTPC had to be halted due to a rise in water level.

"We were able to dig 150 m of the tunnel but after a rise in water level we had to halt the work. Most missing persons were working at the two projects; they came from across India. We expect to get a clear picture on their identities by Monday morning," Mr. Kumar told *The Hindu*. He added that a timely warning to residents living

downstream to evacuate had saved many lives.

While the Rishiganga hydel project had an installed capacity of 13.2 megawatts (MW), the 520 MW NTPC Tapovan-Vishnugad project on the Dhauliganga was much larger. Both sites have been virtually washed away, an eyewitness told this newspaper.

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ITBP rescues workers stuck in tunnel

Covered in mud, several men were safely pulled one after the other from slush-covered tunnel by ITBP personnel in the Tapovan power project area. ▶ PAGE 9

Dhauliganga at an all-time high

The water level of Dhauliganga river at Joshimath flowed at a perilously high level, breaching all records. Central Water Commission officials said after a part of the Nanda Devi glacier broke off, leading to massive flash floods. ▶ PAGE 9

Experts point to climate change

Environmental experts have attributed the glacial melt to global warming. Glacier retreat and permafrost thaw are projected to decrease stability of slopes. ▶ PAGE 9

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Earlier in the day, Mr. Rawat said people along riverbanks were being evacuated.

Dams in Shrinagar and Rishikesh were emptied out, Mr. Rawat said as the raging waters made their way downstream. By late afternoon, the flow of the Alaknanda, of which the Dhauliganga is a tributary, had stabilised.

Apart from the local police and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), four columns of the Army were also deployed for rescue operations as some 35 people are believed to be still trapped inside the Tapovan project tunnel.

There is no danger of downstream flooding and the rise in water level has been contained, as per information given by the Central Water Commission, the NCMC statement said.

"There is also no threat to the neighbouring villages. At the same time, the concerned agencies of the Centre and the State were asked to keep a strict vigil on the situation, and a team from DRDO, who monitor avalanches, is being flown in for surveillance and reconnaissance," it added.

One motorable road and four suspension bridges connecting around eight villages in the area with the district headquarters have also been washed away by the avalanche.

In response to a question, Mr. Rawat said the authorities had not been able to assess the damage caused by the flash floods yet as the administration was busy with rescue operations. He announced compensation of ₹4 lakh each to the families of those who perished in the disaster.