NEPAL QUAKE TOUGH TEST FOR "WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS AIRPORT"

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Flying into Nepal's Lukla airport -- the gateway to Mount Everest -- demands courage and precision, thanks to its tiny, treacherous runway perched on a steep cliff.

For half a century, pilots have needed to navigate snow-capped peaks and endure erratic weather to land on a runway just 500 metres long, which has been carved into a mountain ridge and sits by a perilous three-kilometre (two-mile) drop.

A litany of deadly crashes, including one in October 2008 which killed all 18 on board except the pilot, has earned Lukla the nickname of the "world's most dangerous airport".

But when a massive earthquake hit Nepal eight months ago, triggering Everest's deadliest avalanche and leaving hundreds of climbers and trekkers stranded, the tiny airfield faced its toughest test yet.

Helicopter pilot Nischal KC told AFP that even on an average day constant "weather changes and the steep terrain sometimes make landing impossible".

"It's high-stakes work and there's very little room for error," he added.

Also known as Tenzing-Hillary Airport after the first men to summit Everest, it has no radar system

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because of the high cost of installation, forcing officials to rely on an outdated voice communications system to track movements in the air.

"The pilots tell us when they are approaching, we give them updates on wind and traffic, then as the aircraft enters Lukla valley, we warn choppers to steer clear for the landing," said air traffic controller Dinesh Koirala.

Mass Panic

Things became even tougher in the aftermath of the April 25 earthquake, which killed nearly 8,900 people across the impoverished Himalayan nation.

Rescue pilots seeking to reach Everest base camp, where an avalanche set off by the 7.8-magnitude quake killed 18 people, were held back for a day because of hostile weather.

When they were finally able to fly, rippling aftershocks brought the threat of further damage.

"Aftershocks kept coming that day but I was more stressed out by the weather. I knew that unless it cleared up, we could not send any choppers to rescue people injured by the avalanche," air traffic controller Koirala told AFP.

Pilot KC, who has been flying in the Everest region for 14 years, recalls starting the day with a prayer.

"My first priority was to get the injured out of base camp but people higher up the mountain were panicking because of all the aftershocks," the Manang Air pilot said.

He made dozens of trips that day to rescue terrified climbers desperate to get off the mountain, and to base camp to rescue the injured.

The frequency of aftershocks and the precarious terrain made landing even more difficult than usual, prompting the pilots to hover overhead and haul climbers up with ropes instead.

As rescuers carried dozens of quake victims into Lukla on sleeping bags doubling as stretchers, the tiny airport began to swell with hundreds of tourists haggling with airline officials for a ticket out.

Back in the control tower, Koirala and his colleagues embarked on the busiest week of their lives, closely monitoring the movement of planes and helicopters to ensure no accidents occurred mid-air.

"The whole week was a blur of flights - the fact that there were so many more aircraft than usual in the air made the job very stressful," Koirala said.

Edmund Hillary

Prior to the airport's construction in 1964, porters would spend days walking from Kathmandu to Lukla, carrying hundreds of kilos of expedition gear on their backs.

Mountaineering legend Edmund Hillary originally planned to build the airfield on flat ground - but local farmers refused to part with their fertile land.

Undeterred, he purchased a steep slope for US$635 and recruited scores of Sherpa villagers to cut down scrub with knives.

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The climber then plied villagers with local liquor and asked them to perform a foot-stomping traditional dance to flatten the land.

"A very festive mood prevailed and the earth received a most resounding thumping. Two days of this rather reduced the Sherpas' enthusiasm for the dance but produced a firm and smooth surface for our airfield," Hillary wrote in his 1998 memoir, "View from the Summit".

As the number of climbers taking on the world's highest mountain has boomed in recent decades, so traffic at Lukla airport -- which can be accessed by helicopter or small aircraft -- has increased.

Spring and autumn tourist seasons are the busiest, but closures are common since clear skies are essential for safe landing on the abbreviated clifftop runway.

Despite the challenges, some say its reputation for danger is undeserved.

"It's unfair to call Lukla the most dangerous airport when there's not much we can do about the terrain or the weather," said Koirala.

"I have no doubt many lives were saved because this airport remained open after the quake."

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