

[CDT Weekly] Issue 282: If This Is a Natural Disaster, What Is There to Hide?

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Editor's Note:

At 10:30 a.m. on August 26, a massive flood and mudslide — a mixture of ice, rock, water, and silt — struck the China-Nepal border region, surging in from the Nepalese side into the Gyirong Port of Entry in Gyirong County, Shigatse, Tibet, and completely burying the port's main structures. The footage captured by surveillance cameras looked like something out of the apocalypse. Seismographs initially recorded what appeared to be a magnitude 4.4 earthquake inside Nepal, but the U.S. Geological Survey, after further analysis, revised its conclusion: this was not an earthquake at all, but the violent shockwave produced when a massive mass of ice and rock, at an elevation of more than 5,000 meters, suddenly collapsed and struck the ground. The debris from the ice collapse moved at roughly 50 meters per second, triggering a terrifying flood and mudslide that gave people almost no time to react, with effects felt across a distance of more than 20 kilometers.

As of August 30, the two countries' jointly released figures put the combined death toll at over 700, with more than 3,000 people missing. Nepal reported 752 dead and 2,502 missing, while China reported 16 dead and 546 unaccounted for. This has become the most severe cross-border disaster the two countries have experienced in recent years.

Given that both sides suffered the same devastating disaster, why is there such a stark discrepancy between the figures released by China and Nepal? Some internet users have observed that although Nepal lags behind China in terms of so-called national capacity, it is "leagues ahead" when it comes to transparency in disaster relief information — for instance, official accounts update bilingual disaster data every few hours, including numbers of dead, missing, and injured, even labeling unclaimed bodies. Moreover, Nepal has not barred foreign media from entering, meaning the public's understanding of the disaster's impact on the Nepalese side far exceeds what is known about the Chinese side. Other users have noted that Nepal uses a broad standard for counting the missing: if someone was roughly in the affected area and their family or friends cannot reach them, they are counted as missing first and sorted out later. Nepal has also designated the disaster zone an "emergency area" for the next two years — effectively announcing that tourism there will be suspended entirely. If this is a natural disaster, something beyond human control, then what exactly is there to hide?

Within Chinese-language public discourse, the first widely circulated material consisted of two pieces of surveillance footage that clearly captured the entire process of the Gyirong port buildings being buried by the mudslide. But editors at China Digital Times found that the footage appeared to have been censored on WeChat, where it could not be forwarded. Meanwhile, videos circulating on Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu likewise lacked complete footage of the building's destruction. This suggests that the surveillance footage showing the "national gate

destroyed" was specifically placed on a censorship list. Some have speculated that the reasoning behind this may carry a distinctly feudal undertone — that the authorities are wary of the "national gate destroyed" imagery provoking malicious associations and commentary. It is worth noting that Gyirong Port is one of the largest land ports of trade along the China-Nepal border, said to carry "highly significant geopolitical importance, while also embodying the solemnity and dignity of the nation." The main structure at Gyirong Port is imposing, far grander in scale than its counterpart on the Nepalese side, and many Chinese tourists crossing the border have been moved to genuine admiration for China's national strength upon seeing it. Yet in the face of such a brutal natural disaster, what significance does this kind of political symbolism actually hold? By comparison, Nepal's approach — disclosing information openly, mounting a timely rescue effort, and insisting that life comes first — has instead won it greater respect and goodwill from other countries.

Some internet users have also pointed out that once information control becomes routine, it is no longer necessary to delete large volumes of content outright to achieve the effect of information filtering. Owing to the long-standing sensitivity of the Tibet issue, local media outlets operate under extremely limited scope and latitude in their reporting, and many Tibetans may simply be excluded from appearing on camera during interviews altogether. Take Tibet Radio and Television's coverage as an example: most of its video content focuses on promoting frontline rescue efforts — at one point, the camera even turned to a stuffed toy rabbit dug out of the mud, with a female reporter holding it up and remarking, "The power of natural disaster is so immense." Furthermore, although cross-regional oversight reporting still exists in China to some degree, in major disaster events like this one — where Premier Li Qiang personally visited the site — many media outlets may in fact find it harder to gain access to the disaster zone. Two WeChat articles touched on this. One wrote: "This is not the first time Gyirong Port has faced this kind of disaster. During the flood seasons of 2025 and 2024, mudslides struck Gyirong Port in consecutive years... No one dares say this will be the last time." The other wrote: "When it comes to disaster response — at least in terms of tallying and releasing casualty figures — Nepal has met the standard of a normal country. Amid the fear and sorrow, I also find myself feeling respect for this country." Both articles were subsequently deleted. Under this kind of precision targeting, discussion of the pre-existing geological engineering risks at Gyirong Port, as well as of the disparity in information disclosure between China and Nepal, has likewise been suppressed.

Amid this information control, two internet users in Hunan were investigated and penalized for spreading online rumors related to the Tibet mudslide. Officials stated that the two had arbitrarily fabricated and exaggerated the number of dead and missing... and fabricated false claims about the cause of the disaster, distorting the facts and misleading public understanding. As for the cause of this massive mudslide, the scientific community believes it is linked both to the long-term effects of climate warming and to human engineering activity in the surrounding area where the disaster occurred. Both the Nepalese and Tibetan sides of the site have hydroelectric power

stations; on the Nepalese side, the number of missing persons associated with hydropower projects alone reportedly reached as high as 933. In recent years, China, India, and Nepal have all been engaged in an infrastructure-building boom in this region. As far back as 2024, a WeChat writer noted that Chinese media rarely pay attention to the issue of climate change, even though China itself has repeatedly been struck by extreme weather events in recent years. And even as Guangxi suffered a rare flood disaster this year — one that even caused a dam breach — many Chinese internet users were still mocking Europeans for lacking "air conditioning freedom." Yet the environmental costs and long-term consequences behind this kind of "air conditioning freedom" or "hydropower freedom" are often obscured by short-term economic gains. Rachael Lord, a senior fellow for sustainable development at the U.S.-based Stimson Center, told media that the pace at which climate risk is evolving has already outstripped humanity's ability to redefine the boundaries of safety. Faced with so many unknowns, if we do not begin to respond collectively, we will simply remain stuck in place — and be struck hard again the next time disaster comes.