

By Ben Blanchard

CHENGDU, China (Reuters) - Nearly 10,000 people were killed by the earthquake that hammered southwest China, officials said on Tuesday as rescuers struggled to reach the worst-hit areas, where many more may have died.

Rescuers worked frantically through the night, pulling bodies from schools, homes, factories and hospitals that were demolished by the 7.8 magnitude quake, which rippled from a mountainous area of Sichuan province across much of China on Monday afternoon.

The toll from China's worst earthquake for over three decades appeared sure to climb as troops struggled on foot to reach the worst-hit area, Wenchuan, a hilly county of 112,000 people 100 km (62 miles) from Sichuan's provincial capital, Chengdu.

About 900 teenagers were buried under a collapsed three-storey school building in the Sichuan city of Dujiangyan.

Premier Wen Jiabao, who rushed there, bowed three times in grief before some of the 50 bodies already pulled out, Xinhua news agency reported.

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