

ASIA NEWS

# Recounting Avalanche, Sherpas Weigh Risks

*Guide Who Narrowly Escaped Disaster That Killed 16 on Everest Describes Dark Day on Mountain, Says He Won't Return*

By KRISHNA POKHAREL

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KATMANDU, Nepal—Pemba Tshering Sherpa had just clambered up an aluminum climbing ladder bridging a deep crevasse on the south face of Mount Everest when a torrent of snow and ice roared down the side of the mountain.

Friday morning's avalanche narrowly missed him. But the shock wave as it passed hurled him 75 feet across the slope. Blinded by a fog of white powder and gasping for breath, he fumbled for his radio and frantically called the base camp.

"Five guys were below me waiting for the ladder," the 26-year-old from a tiny village in eastern Nepal reported. "It looks like they were all swept away."

Mr. Sherpa would later learn the five men were among 16 people—all of them Sherpa guides—who lost their lives, according to a senior Nepali official, on the deadliest day so far in the history of climbing Everest. Two of them were his close friends, he said.

Guides such as Mr. Sherpa, who started working on Everest when he was 22, bear much of the risk in a mountaineering industry fueled by demand from Western adventurers. They make multiple trips over hazardous terrain during the climbing season, carrying supplies, setting up camps and positioning ropes and ladders for their clients.

Sherpa is the name of an ethnic mountain-dwelling people in Nepal and individuals from the community often use Sherpa in their surnames. Many Sherpa guides come from poor mountain villages and risk the dangers of climbing Everest because they need the relatively well-paying work in one of the world's least-developed countries.

Mr. Sherpa, who helps support his widowed mother and two sisters with his guide income, said he would have earned \$50 if he had completed his run from one base camp to a higher-altitude camp on Friday. In a two-month climbing season, he said he can take home \$5,000 to \$6,000, depending on the loads he carries and the altitudes he climbs. Per capita income in Nepal is about \$750 annually.

"There is an economy of risk that takes place behind the scenes, whereby most of the risks get

outsourced to cheap labor," said Freddie Wilkinson, a professional climber and guide who lives in New Hampshire.

For instance, a Sherpa guide might cross the Khumbu Icefall, one of the most dangerous parts of Everest, a dozen or more times making preparations so foreign climbers can pass through three to four times during their ascent.

Since the 1990s, the number of foreign climbers has increased significantly, expanding the number of guide jobs available but also exposing more people to the risks. Foreigners pay from about \$30,000 to more than \$120,000 to climb Everest, according to people familiar with the business.

The disaster has some reconsidering whether the money they earn is worth the risk and whether the increasing commercialization of climbs is threatening the sanctity of a mountain considered holy.

"We lost so many of our boys," said Chhedar Sherpa, a 49-year-old guide who lost a friend in the avalanche. "It's made us pause and question whether the money we make is really worth the loss of our own lives and the harm to our own mountain from the mountaineering."

The men killed were carrying equipment and supplies to a high-altitude camp on the route to the 29,000-foot peak. About 40 teams have been preparing for the climb this season, which starts in April and runs through May.

Pemba Tshering Sherpa said he had been assigned to an expedition by NBC's Peacock Productions to produce a live broadcast of a stunt man jumping from the summit in a wings suit for the Discovery Channel. Discovery said Sunday it wouldn't go ahead with the show.

In an interview from a hospital bed in Katmandu where Mr. Sherpa is being treated for chest injuries, he said dozens of guides set out Friday at about 3:30 a.m. to minimize the risk of shifting ice as sun warms the mountain. He carried more than 30 pounds in his pack loaded with three tents. Other guides working for the NBC expedition were carrying rice, spaghetti and canned foods to store up the mountain for the TV crew to eat when they ascended later.

While climbing, guides seldom speak, Mr. Sherpa said. They need to focus on maneuvering with their loads across narrow aluminum ladders that bridge cracks in the Khumbu Icefall and be alert to dangers. As he crossed the icefall, he said he repeated a Buddhist mantra for energy and compassion. Once across, he thought the worst was over. But then, higher up the mountain near a place where guides often rest and look down on the base camp, the avalanche struck, he recalled.

Suber Shrestha, a Nepali government official who serves as liaison officer for Everest expeditions, said some guides who survived told him that a mass of ice boulders the size of a large house ripped down the slope.

About 90 minutes after the snow and ice swept down, rescue teams began to arrive from the base

camp, Mr. Sherpa said. Seven survivors were pulled from the snow, Mr. Shrestha said.

Three with critical injuries were airlifted by helicopter from the avalanche site to Katmandu. The bodies of 13 dead were recovered, but search teams were unable to reach three others because they were stuck in deep and narrow crevasses, Mr. Shrestha said.

Authorities said Sunday they were halting recovery efforts because there was little chance of success.

Mr. Sherpa—who said he became a guide for the money and to be able to climb Everest—eventually hiked back down the mountain to the base camp.

He was evacuated by helicopter to Katmandu from there.

Now, he said he was planning to give up his job as a guide.

"I don't see any future in it," he said. "After this, I think it's not worth it."

—Nikita Lalwani in New Delhi and William Launder in New York contributed to this article.

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