

Quake victims settle into newly built homes

People who lost their homes in a May earthquake in Tashkurgan Tajik autonomous county, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, have started to move into the new earthquake-resistant homes.

A magnitude 5.5 earthquake rocked Tashkurgan, home of people from the Tajik ethnic group on the Pamir Plateau, on May 11. Eight people were killed and 31 injured, according to local officials.

More than 4,750 houses were destroyed. The biggest reconstruction project is in Quzgun, the quake's epicenter, where all the casualties were reported.

On Wednesday, Quzgun villagers began to move into the first 52 new houses from the disaster-relief tents they have been living in for more than four months.

The family of Gulpiya Meli threw a traditional Tajik housewarming party when they moved into their new home on Wednesday. The earthquake had destroyed her family home. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

"I cannot believe that I can sleep in the new house before school summer break is over," the 15-year-old said while offering guests milk porridge as a gesture of welcome.

In June, the Xinjiang government pledged to build earthquake-resistant houses for those who lost their homes before the harshest cold arrives.

More than 480 million yuan (\$72.8 million) has been invested in the reconstruction project. So far, 2,609 houses have been completed and 793 are ready for the locals to move in. The construction work continues.

Mao Ermin, project manager at the Quzgun site, said it is not easy to build so many new houses on the plateau in just 83 days. Tashkurgan sits at 3,090 meters above sea level and is close to the borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"Many workers suffer from altitude sickness when they came to Tashkurgan in June. They carried on working even with headaches so the villagers could move in before winter arrives," he said.

Mao and his team were invited to the housewarming party and watched the locals dance while some played the traditional Tajik eagle flutes in the new houses.

He said he believes the hard work has paid off.