

An Afghan mountain spares some

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aster, just 300 meters, or 1,000 feet, below the tunnel at the top of the 3,657-meter pass, and it would prove to be the worst place of all.

There was a noise like thunder, and he felt what seemed like a blast, and then he didn't remember anything except clutching the steering wheel as the car rolled down the mountain and landed on its roof, snow piling over it. It was 9 p.m. on Monday.

The highway had been packed with traffic, and officials would later estimate that 100 or more vehicles were buried just here, some of them after tumbling as much as 500 meters down the slope, others right on the road.

Within an hour, Mr. Mohammed's family knew he had not made it over the pass, and began calling his cellphone, getting an out-of-service message.

On Tuesday, there was so much snow over the roadway that the only way to reach here was by helicopters, which began arriving about 1 p.m., or by foot. Even on Wednesday the highway was still blocked for much of the morning.

"We've had many avalanches here," said the Parwan Province police chief, Maulana Sayedkhili. "This is the worst one ever." Mr. Adrak said that of 300 injured people who had been recovered, 67 of them remain in critical condition.

There have been deadlier avalanches in history, going back to Hannibal's disastrous crossing of the Alps in 218 B.C. This was the worst though since 1991 when avalanches buried several towns in Bingöl, Turkey, killing 255.

When a Russian-made MI-17 helicopter put down Wednesday, on a makeshift helipad on the snow-covered highway, half-excavated cars were still strewn around a snowfield on the downhill side. Two were buses, one still mostly buried, lying on its side. Another was planted front end down.

Mr. Mohammed was alive and conscious in the darkness of his buried Toyota; one of his passengers had been thrown out, three others were injured. It took him until 3 a.m., six hours later, to find his cellphone and call home.

When rescuers from the nearest village reached the bus the next morning, it had been completely buried, with just the rear bumper sticking out, according to one of the villagers, Azizullah, who like many Afghans has only one name. They started digging and found 14 people still alive, those in the back of the bus, closest to the surface. Piled be-



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Blocked by deadly avalanches, Afghan truck drivers bided their time Wednesday in a tunnel along the Salang Pass in Parwan Province.

neath them, however, there were 40 dead passengers.

Another helicopter brought the governor of Parwan Province, Basir Salangi, who held an impromptu press conference. So far, he said, 150 bodies had been found, but he estimated that another 50 vehicles remained buried. "We expect it will reach 200 dead before we're finished," he said. "There are still a lot of cars under the snow."

Rescue workers began digging there with shovels — the only tools they had, and not many of them; there were at least five workers for every shovel. They soon struck the metal of a roof. It was Wednesday afternoon, two full days after the avalanches began, before heavy equipment reached this point.

The day before though only a handful of rescuers got this far, on foot, among them Mr. Mohammed's brother, Baryalai, 24, who is also a taxi driver. Mr. Baryalai had been on the phone all night as his buried brother tried to guide him

and other family members to where he was. It was only 100 meters from the entombed bus and, similarly, a single wheel of his car protruded from the snow.

"The snow was blowing so hard we couldn't even see it," Mr. Baryalai said. "He was saying exactly where he was, he knows this road really well." Hours went by. "I was frustrated and he was upset." His brother wanted to say farewell to his family, his wife and six-year-old son. "I wouldn't let him say goodbye, I said, 'We're going to get you out of here.'"

Cars and buses that were not swept off the road saved many lives. Taxi driver Abdul Raouf was close to a sharp cliff on the uphill side, so the snow enveloped his car rather than pushing it over the edge. He and his five passengers huddled under blankets for 22 hours before rescuers found them. "We didn't have oxygen, but Allah helped us," he said. They were among 2,500

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people rescued, Afghan officials said.

After four hours of fruitless searching, the wind bated and Mr. Baryalai saw the wheel sticking out of the snow and banged on it with a shovel. Mr. Mohammed responded over his still-working cell phone and Mr. Baryalai dug out a door and pulled his brother and two survivors out. One of the passengers had died. It was 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 13 hours later.

Mr. Mohammed, it turned out, was not all that lucky. He was paralyzed from the waist down, apparently from frostbite. "At least he's alive," his brother said.

Abdul Waheed Wafa contributed reporting.