

# Nepal resumes rescue helicopter flights to Mount Everest

AFP- Nepali airlines have resumed rescue helicopter flights to the Everest region, an aviation industry official announced Tuesday, following weeks of suspension prompted by protests from locals citing environmental impact and loss of income from trekkers.

Helicopters are a key means of transport and crucial for emergency rescue in many remote regions around mountainous Nepal, vast stretches of which are often inaccessible by road.

But they have also been used to give mountaineering teams and tourists a shortcut over challenging terrain in the Sagarmatha National Park, home to Mount Everest, the world's highest peak.

For those who can afford the \$1,000 price tag, helicopters reduce the two-week long trek to Everest base camp to just a day – depriving Nepalis along the overland route of a key source of revenue.

In early January, the Airlines Operators Association of Nepal grounded all flights, blaming the halt on local youths who had blocked landing sites with flags.

The association also said the protesters had warned pilots who landed that they would be forced to walk back on foot.

On Tuesday, association official Pratap Jung Pandey told AFP that rescue flights were reopened Saturday “on humanitarian grounds”.

But commercial flights to the region were still suspended, as negotiations with locals for their resumption were ongoing.

“It is going in a positive direction and it should reopen soon. But I cannot say exactly when,” Pandey told AFP.

Over 50,000 tourists visit the Everest region every year.

According to the association, the Everest region sees about 15 helicopter flights per day in the winter and up to 60 per day during peak tourist season.

“Rescue flights are crucial in mountaineering to save lives of climbers if anything happens,” said Mingma Gyalje Sherpa who runs Imagine Nepal, a mountaineering expedition company.

Earlier this month, German mountaineer Jost Kobusch – who has made several Himalayan ascents – cited the lack of helicopter rescues as one of the reasons for ending his solo winter climb up Everest.

“I have never been rescued due to an emergency in my career but right now there are protests going on... making helicopter rescues impossible,” he said in a January 11 post on Instagram.

Kobusch also cited other factors, like aftershocks from an earthquake causing riskier conditions.

AFP