

Heavy rains cause fatal accidents in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The death toll from accidents caused by the heaviest winter rains to lash Pakistan in five years rose to 24 yesterday Tuesday.

Torrential rains have been pounding the south coast and northern Pakistan since the weekend. Heavy snowfalls have also been reported in the north-west and north-east border areas.

"These are the heaviest winter rains in five years," director general of Meteorological Services at Pakistan's Meteorological Office, Qamar-uz-Zaman Chaudhry, told AFP.

Around 156 millimeters of rain has fallen in Islamabad since Sunday. The Murree hills north-east of the capital received 171 millimeters, said Chaudhry, adding that data for the rest of the country will still be collected.

Overnight three people were killed when the roof of their house collapsed in Bajaur district, a tribal area bordering Afghanistan in Pakistan's northwest.

The bodies of two Afghan refugees had been found buried in deep snow on Monday.

In neighbouring Mohmand district four bodies were pulled from a swollen river after a jeep skidded and plunged into it overnight. Earlier Monday two men were killed when a truck and passenger van collided in the same district.

Two children were killed in separate accidents when roofs collapsed on Monday.

Also Monday ten people including a 10-year-old child were killed in southern Pakistan when their mud-brick houses collapsed under the force of the rains.

A similar accident took the life of a nine-year-old girl in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

UN confirms first U2 flight over Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

The United Nations confirmed yesterday that a first U2 spy plane has flown over Iraq and that outstanding issues over the surveillance missions have now been "sorted out."

"I can confirm the flight, and if the flight took place it means that things have been sorted out," Hiro Ueki, spokesman for the UN disarmament inspectors in Iraq, told AFP.

The United Nations had insisted the flights be allowed without conditions, but Baghdad demanded to be informed about the timing of the flights and points of entry into Iraqi airspace.

The Iraqi foreign ministry announced that a first U2 spy plane flew over Iraq on Monday and surveyed several areas for four hours and 20 minutes.

It was the first surveillance flight over Iraq by the United Nations since arms inspections resumed in November, following a break since December 1998 when Iraq suffered three nights of US and British air strikes for failing to cooperate with arms inspectors.

On February 10, Iraq sought to stave off war by agreeing unconditionally to UN demands for U2, French Mirage and Russian Antonov surveillance flights over its territory to back the new weapons inspections process.

Operating the U2 aircraft to monitor Iraq's weapons programs had been a long-standing demand by the UN arms inspectors.

U2s fly at altitudes of more than 21,000 metres (70,000 feet). They are best at scanning fixed installations and can spend more time over sites than spy satellites, which can only take a few minutes of pictures each day.

Stampede at Chicago night club claims 21

REUTERS, Chicago

Twenty-one people were killed in a stampede at an illegally operating Chicago night club on Monday when they tried to escape pepper spray that was used to break up a fight and were crushed behind blocked doors, officials said.

"People just died in my arms," Tonita Matthews, a young woman who was at the club and tried to help those injured, told the Chicago NBC television affiliate.

Another young woman who survived the ordeal that injured roughly 50 told of a man in the tangle of bodies who asked her to tell his mother he loved her.

City officials said they obtained a court order in July to close the second-floor club due to 11 building code violations that included shoddy construction and problems with the stairway and exit signs.

Officials could not explain why the club, once a car showroom, was allowed remained open, but said criminal contempt charges would be brought against the owner as soon as Tuesday. Two companies were identified by authorities as the building's owner and liquor license holder, but another firm may have rented the space.

Meanwhile, relatives and friends

of the victims combed area hospitals, and some were directed to the city's morgue to identify the dead, emerging stricken. A makeshift memorial of flowers and written prayers was left outside the club for the 12 women and nine men who died.

Witnesses at the club said a fight broke out, perhaps between two women, and a security guard used a crowd control agent identified as pepper spray to break it up.

The crowd panicked, surging toward the steep front stairway where some apparently tripped or fell, causing a human avalanche. Bodies, living and dead, piled up behind a double glass exit door that was apparently jammed shut by the crush. Patrons said only one door was open to prevent people from sneaking in without paying.

Joyce said fire-fighters found at least one alternative exit locked, but he revised an earlier statement that bodies were found at other locked or blocked exits. He said those victims had been placed there as a temporary morgue after dying in the front stairwell.

Witnesses said about 1,500 party-goers were packed in the dance hall above the Epitome restaurant on Chicago's near South Side when the stampede occurred. Firemen received the first call for help for a pregnant woman at 2:24

a.m. CST. Matthews said she was at the front of a group which ran down the stairs. She managed to get out the front door where she started giving first aid. While some responded she said she knows at least one man died in her arms and fears she lost others as well. "I seen so many people on top of each other dead," she said.

Lamont James Jr., who works for the Chicago park district, said he was trapped for a while in a pile of bodies on the front stairs but managed to escape.

"The bodies were literally piled up from the top to the bottom of the stairs," he told WGN television in Chicago. He also said a rear exit to the building was not open.

One man said he helped pull an unconscious pregnant woman from the stack of bodies, and saw two victims whose faces were crushed and bloodied.

The club, in a black entertainment district south of downtown Chicago, was crowded as party-goers stayed out before dawn on Monday's Presidents Day holiday. The Epitome is an upscale restaurant on the first floor, while the large dance floor above called "E-2" features music by discjockeys.



PHOTO:AFP
An elderly Palestinian man argues with an Israeli soldier during curfew in the centre of the divided West Bank city of Hebron yesterday. Israeli troops shot dead a Hamas militant after Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz vowed to hit hard at the radical Islamic group which destroyed a tank at the weekend, as reports emerged that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had met with a leading Palestinian reformist.

Israeli soldiers kill another Hamas militant

AFP, Hebron, West Bank

Israeli troops shot dead a Hamas militant yesterday after Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz vowed to hit hard at the radical Islamic group which destroyed a tank at the weekend, as reports emerged that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had met with a leading Palestinian reformist.

The troops killed Mohammed Mur, an alleged member of Hamas' armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, in an overnight raid on his home in Yatta, south of Hebron, an army spokesman said on Tuesday.

The spokesman said soldiers surrounded his house and shot the man dead after he refused to give himself up.

The killing came less than a day after an undercover Israeli unit operating in the Gaza Strip killed a local Hamas field commander in an ambush to arrest him, but which ended in a deadly shoot-out.

That operation followed the deaths of six Hamas militants in Gaza on Sunday, a blast blamed on Israel by Hamas, which has warned all its cells to be ready to avenge the deaths.

Mofaz said he would strike hard at Hamas in its Gaza bastion after

the group claimed responsibility for a blast on Saturday morning which blew up an Israeli tank making a foray into a Palestinian-controlled area of northern Gaza, killing all four crew members.

The army found a quarter tonne of explosives in a bomb factory hidden in a house in the southern Gaza Strip in a raid on Monday night, as well as a mortar bomb and an explosive-packed belt of the type used in suicide attacks in a second house near the Egyptian border.

The troops blew up both buildings and arrested nine Palestinians, four of whom were wanted for suspected involvement in anti-Israeli attacks, an army spokesman said.

Palestinian security officials also said 10 members of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement were arrested in Yamun village near Nablus in the northern West Bank on Tuesday.

Despite the ongoing violence, with the Palestinian intifada closing in on its 29th month and with almost 3,000 killed, Sharon and Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayad held secret talks on a ceasefire and reform efforts over the weekend, Israeli private television said.

Blair's popularity plummets over war against Iraq

AFP, London

A new poll shows that for the first time a clear majority of Britons oppose war with Iraq, while the personal rating of Prime Minister Tony Blair - America's staunchest ally in the crisis - has plunged, the Guardian reported yesterday.

The ICM poll for the left-of-centre newspaper showed that 52 per cent opposed war with Iraq. Support for the war was at its lowest yet, at 29 per cent.

Meanwhile, Blair's personal rating has plunged to minus 20. Only 35 per cent were satisfied with his performance while 55 per cent were dissatisfied, with around nine per cent "don't know".

The poll found that 41 per cent said UN weapons inspectors should be given only a few more weeks to do their work in Iraq, but a further 49 per cent said they should be given

"months or longer".

ICM interviewed 1,003 people by telephone between February 14 and 16.

Blair's chief strategist and closest adviser Alastair Campbell dismissed the poll, saying on LBC radio on Tuesday that such surveys "swing around the whole time".

Of Blair, he said: "He is somebody with very strong beliefs who believes in doing what he thinks is right -- and what he thinks is right at the moment is trying to get Iraq to disarm peacefully through the United Nations."

Blair is US President George W. Bush's staunchest ally on Iraq, committing 30,000 troops, a 17-ship naval task force and some 100 warplanes to a possible US-led war on Saddam.

That's put him at loggerheads with the EU's leading powers France and Germany, whose hopes of delaying

war got a boost over the weekend with big peace marches across Europe and around the world.

More than 750,000 turned out Saturday for London's anti-war march, even as Blair -- at a Labour congress in Scotland -- argued that Saddam's downfall would be an act of humanity.

In a report Tuesday, the Times newspaper said Britain would consider a French request for a meeting of the UN Security Council on March 14 if it thinks such a move would secure passage of a fresh UN resolution opening the door to use of force against Iraq.

"It may be that the price of having everyone on board will be agreeing to the French request to postpone weapons inspector Hans Blix's final report until March 14, instead of America's preferred date of February 28," the Sun newspaper added.

Identification team puts Bali blast toll at 202

AFP, Jakarta

The Bali bomb attacks in October by a regional terror network killed 202 people from 21 countries, police said yesterday, fixing what is believed to be a final death toll.

A disaster victims identification team of foreign and local forensic experts has completed four months of work on the resort island, identifying a total 199 victims -- only eight of whom died in other countries or en route, Bali police spokesman Yatim Suyatmo told AFP.

Three bodies have yet to be identified, he said, and 140 bags of body parts have been collected. Officials have said these bags will be buried on the island.

"This appears to be the final figure regarding the dead as there will no longer be any official team working on further identification," said Suyatmo.



PHOTO:AFP
British prime minister Tony Blair attend a press conference. French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder during the crisis meeting of the EU Blair said late Monday that Saddam Hussein is facing Heads of State and Government on the possible Iraq final opportunity to disarm peacefully, after the EU agreed conflict on February 17, 2003 at the EU headquarters in Brussels.

US, Britain push new resolution on Iraq at United Nations

REUTERS, United Nations

The United States and Britain worked on a new UN resolution that would back an attack against Iraq, despite a reluctant Security Council and expected opposition from other nations in a Tuesday debate.

But no draft is expected to emerge before Wednesday, with US and British officials waiting for the end of a public meeting by countries without seats on the 15-member Security Council, diplomats said. That session, expected to turn into another forum against US war plans, begins Tuesday afternoon and spills over into Wednesday.

John Negroponte, the US ambassador to the United Nations, met his British counterpart, Sir Jeremy Greenstock on Monday to discuss "next steps and tactics, including the resolution," said one diplomat close to the talks.

Tuesday's meeting at 3 p.m. EST (2000 GMT) was requested by

South Africa, which holds the current chair of the 115-nation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of developing countries and whose members are strongly opposed to war.

"We have no military or financial strength, but we can join the world movement to oppose war on moral grounds," Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who takes over NAM leadership next week, said on Monday.

Prospects for achieving a quick and clean resolution authorising war also dimmed after the chief UN weapons inspector, Hans Blix, on Friday gave a more positive report than last month on the progress of his work in Iraq.

Earlier this month, the United States spoke of a resolution explicitly authorising force. Last week this was toned down to declaring Iraq in "material breach" of a Nov. 8 council resolution, words that would give the legal basis for war, and threaten "serious consequences."

Now, some envoys are speaking of using "flagrant violation" instead of "material breach," while others want to issue a set of conditions to Iraq within a tight deadline to disclose any weapons of mass destruction programs.

But an option issuing President Saddam Hussein an ultimatum to relinquish power is considered unlikely. This would be tantamount to a call for "regime change," that most of the 15 council members would reject as illegal, diplomats said.

UN backing is particularly important for Britain and other European nations that support the United States, which has amassed 250,000 troops in the Gulf for an attack many analysts believe will come in mid-March. Anti-war protests over the weekend showed massive turnouts throughout the globe, with 750,000 people protesting in London alone.

At the United Nations, whatever support Secretary of State Colin

Powell received after his Feb. 5 video presentation about how Iraq defied the inspectors, diminished on Friday when France's Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin galvanised many council members against an immediate attack.

French President Jacques Chirac made clear again on Monday he would not support a new UN resolution at this stage.

"We consider that war is always, always, the worst solution," Chirac said. The Bush administration had thought it could fairly easily get the minimum nine votes needed for adoption of a resolution and then dare France, Russia and China -- permanent council members with veto rights -- to kill the measure.

But Friday's debate showed this was not yet the case with the United States and Britain receiving strong support from only Spain and mild backing from Bulgaria. Other council members either backed France or were undecided.



PHOTO:REUTERS
Cities and towns from Virginia to Connecticut began digging out from the worst winter storm in seven years. The National Weather Service was forecasting more snow to fall in Boston, with an estimated total accumulation of between 15 and 25 inches.

Northeastern US buried under several feet of snow

REUTERS, Boston

The deadly blizzard that closed major airports, stranded thousands of travellers and buried much of the Northeast under several feet of snow was set to linger a while longer yesterday over parts of New England.

Snow removal crews struggled to clear up from the Nor'easter that roared out of the Midwest on Sunday and dumped about two feet of snow on the nation's capital. The rough weather was cited as a cause in at least 10 deaths from Kentucky to New Jersey.

The storm, dubbed the "Beast of the East" by US media, cut power to more than 100,000 homes and businesses in Ohio and Kentucky. Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton declared his state a disaster area, while similar status was given to three counties in southern Ohio.

The blizzard dumped just under 20 inches on New York's Central Park as of 9 p.m. EST on Monday, and the National Weather Service said that put it among the top snowfalls in the city's history.

Heavy winds caused whitout conditions and snow drifts as deep as four feet in the mid-Atlantic region, and blizzard warnings were issued from New York to Boston.

Police closed streets near the United Nations because of falling debris from buildings blamed on the storm. The UN Security Council postponed by several hours an open meeting on Iraq that had been due to start on Tuesday morning.

As authorities warned motorists to stay off the roads, most people spent Presidents' Day inside their homes or out playing in the snow -- but not shopping. That dealt a harsh blow to retailers who typically bank on big markdowns to drum up sales

on the national holiday. Along Broadway and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, both small boutiques and big chain stores were shuttered for lack of customers and sales staff. Central Park became a winter wonderland for cross-country skiers and sledding children.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg predicted it would take nearly two days and cost \$17 million to clear all of the city's roads once the snow stopped falling -- and he warned that some streets may not be dug out at all.

"It's very pretty; it's very inconvenient, and it's very expensive." The US government's Office of Personnel Management said on its Web site all federal agencies in the Washington area would be closed on Tuesday except for "emergency" employees.

India's nuke programme faces cash crunch

THE STATESMAN/ANN

The latest fund crisis has prompted the nuclear establishment of India to protest strongly. Dr. Anil Kakodkar, Secretary, department of atomic energy, which runs the nuclear reactors and the programme for developing nuclear weapons, has written to the government saying that he is clearly unhappy with the proposed allocations to the DAE about the financial difficulties.

Scientists of the DAE, who are likely to be part of the newly-created Strategic Command, responsible for the country's nuclear arsenal, are upset that the domestic budgetary support for the 2003-2004 financial year will be around Rs 1,900 crore.

This is not only Rs 1,000 crore less than what the DAE has asked for (about Rs 2,900 crore), but also considerably lower than the budget estimates of last year Rs 2,313

crore and the actual expenditure last financial year, estimated to be over Rs 2,400 crore. There are several reasons why the DAE is so upset at the proposed cut.

Altogether eight nuclear power plants are being built and a 500MW prototype fast breeder reactor is likely to start in the next financial year.

If there is a delay because of a funds crunch, the cost of building the reactors will go up and finally, the cost of generating each unit of electricity will escalate. Nor can, the department argues, funds be diverted from the DAE's other projects some of them are of strategic importance, while others deal with research and development.

Sources said that the finance ministry may hike the DAE's allocation by several hundred crores of rupees following the strong protest, but the final figures are yet to be worked out.