



PHOTO: AFP

Residents, left, stand near a destroyed building yesterday in Boumerdes, 30 kilometres east of Algiers. A man, right, comforts a woman crying after the body of a relative was found in rubble. Thousands were feared trapped beneath the rubble of their homes, two days after an earthquake rocked northern Algeria claiming at least 1,600 lives.

Hundreds still trapped as quake toll crosses 1,600

AFP, Algiers

Hundreds, maybe thousands, were yesterday feared trapped beneath the rubble of their homes, two days after an earthquake rocked northern Algeria claiming at least 1,600 lives.

Rescue teams backed by volunteers faced an enormous task amid the devastation wrought by Wednesday's quake which measured up to 6.8 on the Richter Scale. Armed with shovels and axes, as well as bare hands, the families of the missing also scrambled to free the living against overwhelming odds.

But hopes were fading fast that there were many survivors beneath the mountains of twisted debris which are all that remains of dozens of apartment blocks, flattened by the worst quake to hit Algeria in more than two decades.

State radio upped the death toll yesterday, quoting an interior ministry statement, saying some 1,600 people were killed and 7,207 injured.

Officials have warned the death toll is likely to rise as the rescuers uncover more bodies from underneath tonnes of debris.

French rescue teams, who arrived in the country on Thursday, have pulled five people, including two little girls, from the rubble.

French authorities said. They had also found 14 bodies.

The 142-strong civil defence team would "stay as long as it takes, with one order, to save the people on the ground," said Eric Soupra, from the French interior ministry.

Two days after the quake struck, the initial shock and trauma was beginning to give way to anger, with victims turning on real-estate developers, accusing them of being corrupt and using shoddy construction methods.

"Why is it that the new buildings have collapsed and the old ones are still standing," asked one man, surveying a pile of flattened buildings east of Algiers, were many were believed to be entombed.

Entire areas of ramshackle housing crumbled like houses of cards when the quake which struck just as families were gathering at home for dinner, or to watch a UEFA football match on the television.

The worst-affected towns were Boumerdes, Reghaia and Rouiba on the eastern outskirts of Algiers.

Yesterday was the start of three days of official mourning, as international aid was pouring into the country to help with the rescue effort.

Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, South Korea, Russia and

Turkey as well as the United Nations have all pledged to help a huge effort by the Algerians to help their already impoverished people.

Trucks were criss-crossing the streets of Algiers to hand out food, blankets and clothes to those who lost everything in just a few moments of terror.

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Crescent has also launched an appeal for 1.5 million dollars to help an estimated 10,000 victims of the quake.

Many more people were apprehensively returning to their homes after spending two nights in the open.

Thousands of Algerians living abroad were also desperately seeking news of their loved ones, after undersea phone cables were snapped, severing all phone links to the country.

France Telecom said it has been "working since Thursday to find alternative ways to carry telephone traffic through neighbouring countries."

Several hundred engineers have been mobilised to try to repair the cables, which lie more than 2,500 meters below the surface and were snapped in several places.

But the damage to the cables was extensive, and repair work was likely to be delicate and lengthy,

France Telecom said, describing the situation as "unprecedented."

AFP from Washington adds: The earthquake was caused by an overlapping of tectonic plates, the World Data Centre for Seismology said.

Geophysicists at the Centre attributed the difference between the US estimate and the magnitude 5.8 reading by Algerian officials to the fact that Algeria's instruments were too close to the site to get an accurate reading.

"Their instruments were so close to the quake that they are overpowered by it, so they don't see all the energy," John Bellini, a geophysicist with the World Data Centre, told AFP.

"It becomes difficult to measure when you are that close to such a large quake."

He added that officials in the region "are only calculating with the data they have. We have hundreds of stations, over 300 stations worldwide for a quake this size. That's how we calculated our magnitude."

French experts measured it as six on the scale.

Northern Algeria is located in a seismic zone and has experienced several deadly earthquakes in recent decades.

Days are numbered for paddle steamers

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The government is soon to withdraw the Dhaka-Khulna-Dhaka rocket service and launch a new route to Khulna, Shipping Minister Akbar Hussain said.

The rocket service, run by old paddle steamers, started in the early years of the last century. But it was only during the last few years that it gained popularity, specially among foreign tourists, for its 'Old World' charm.

The international tourist guidebook, Lonely Planet, highly recommends the rocket service to explore riverine Bangladesh in luxury.

According to the newly planned route, the waterway takes one as far as Hularhat from Dhaka. Once in Hularhat, the passengers and freight customers are to travel to Khulna by bus and trucks.

The passengers and freight customers will be able to buy tickets for Khulna from Dhaka.

It takes about one and a half hours from Hularhat to Khulna by road against more than six hours in a paddle steamer, the minister said.

"The new route would not only save passengers Tk 35,000 per trip but also a minimum of five hours' time to reach Khulna," the minister added.

To enhance the service the authorities will introduce three new passenger vessels at a cost of Tk 15 crore.

Medicine worth Tk 1cr seized at ZIA

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Customs officials seized contraband medicines worth about Tk 1 crore at Zia International Airport yesterday.

The seizure of medicines took place three days after three Pakistani women were arrested with 14 kilograms of heroin at the airport in one of the largest drug busts.

A team led by the airfreight unit's Assistant Commissioner Khondoker Aftab Jahan seized the consignment of medicines in four cartons wrapped in polythene. The team was alerted by Joint Commissioner Ahmed Munir Salehin.

The consignment, addressed to Raju Enterprise, 53 South Muggdapara, Dhaka, was imported on a declaration of books.

The cartons were opened in the presence of officials of different agencies working at the airport and 15 types of medicines, including tablets and injections, were found.

The importer chose the weekend to clear the consignment with the help of airport staffers, said customs sources. A departmental case was filed. Another case was filed against the importer.

Development at hills down at heel

PINAKI ROY, back from CHT

No significant development has taken place in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) since the peace pact was signed more than five years ago.

Donors took some development initiatives following the signing of the agreement, but no project has been implemented so far. Different government agencies, including the CHT Development Board, are running some service-oriented organisations like schools and hospitals and helping refugees. But that could not change the overall standard of living in the region.

"In most cases, development strategies are formulated by the plain land people. But they are not capable of realising or working out the real needs of the tribal people," said a tribal government official.

On February 16, 2001, three foreign nationals were abducted, while they were working on a road development project funded by the Danish government. All the donor agencies suspended their development schemes after the incident.

Last year, the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) and government officials visited the CHT to assess whether the uplift efforts could resume. The team submitted a report titled "Donor Review of the CHT: Security Assessment." It stated that all the upazila of the CHT were risk-free to run development programmes. Some of the UNDP project proposals are now lying with the finance ministry for approval.

"The UNDP is yet to start any development work in the CHT. But some projects are in the pipeline," Lisa Hielier, UNDP communication officer, said.

The government is running some of the projects through the CHT Development Board, the CHT Affairs Ministry and the Regional Council. From 1976 to 2002, the board implemented 1,090 development schemes in agriculture, education, industry, communication, sports, culture and social welfare sectors.

But the government has slashed the uplift fund for the region significantly this year. It allocated Tk 39.15 crore, down from about Tk 61.77 crore last year.

The board has spent a huge amount of money in the region, but there is so far no sign of significant development in the CHT, said Jotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, chairman of CHT Regional Council and chairman of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity, at a press conference in Dhaka recently.

During a visit to the three hill districts, it was learned that people living in the hills are not happy, as the peace treaty did not bring any qualitative change to their lives. Now the government is providing the poorest of the people with food grains as ration. It is giving the Hill District Council 95,000 tonnes of food grains and Tk 1 crore annually through the CHT ministry.

More than 100 NGOs have started environment, education and awareness building projects in the CHT.

The government allocated five acres of land to some landless tribal families in Bandarban town in the 1980s. But within two decades, they have sold out the land to settlers.

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Biman's overseas bungling

Airline loses Tk 1.5cr on outstanding bills, illegal travel allowance

RAFIQ HASAN

Nine overseas stations of Biman Bangladesh Airlines lost Tk 1.45 crore to outstanding dues with general sales agents, illegal travel allowance and unauthorised funds to staffers.

The stations in Jeddah, Riyadh, Tokyo, Bangkok, Brussels, New York, Frankfurt, Abu Dhabi and Kathmandu also drained public funds in additional entertainment bills, house rents, medical allowance and utility bills, says a recent audit report.

"We are taking action against the Biman officials and employees, based on audit reports," State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin told The Daily Star yesterday.

The officials accused of misuse and waste of funds had been withdrawn, he said. A team under a

joint secretary of the civil aviation ministry visited the London station and reduced the ground-handling charge 30 per cent, which saves at least Tk 2 crore a year, he added. The team will also visit all other overseas stations and submit a report on the allegations of financial corruption and mismanagement.

The Biman Jeddah office failed to realise an overdue amount of Tk 1.29 crore from M/s Arine Travels after expiry of an agreement with the agent.

The stations in Tokyo, Bangkok, Brussels and Riyadh wasted Tk 5.24 lakh in illegal travel allowance in October and December in 1996 and February in 1999.

The New York, Frankfurt, Abu Dhabi, Brussels and Jeddah stations spent Tk 3.43 lakh on unauthorised day allowance, overseas stay allowance and entertainment bills.

The Jeddah station lost Tk 1.21 lakh to travel allowance to the employees appointed temporarily for Hajj duty. Government rules say the employees appointed on a temporary basis are not eligible for travel allowance.

Biman paid US\$5,000 (about Tk 3 lakh) in compensation for damage to a house rented by the country manager in Brussels, as the homeowner filed a case against the airlines.

The stations in Bangkok and Riyadh spent Tk 60,662 on buying bottled water for staffers, although they were to bear the cost themselves.

The Abu Dhabi station paid Tk 47,705 in power, water and gas bills for its country manager's house. According to the Biman service regulations 1979, such bills should not be paid from Biman funds.

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Not too easy to address overnight, says Moudud

In-built complications blamed for delay in separation of judiciary, formation of HR and anti-corruption bodies

ZAYADUL AHSAN

Separation of the judiciary, formation of human rights and anti-corruption commissions and installation of an ombudsman are not in sight, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed said.

In-built complications are holding back their implementation, he said in an interview with The Daily Star.

"These are not so simple that could be actualised overnight," the minister said, adding: "I have been hearing discussions about these issues since the 1950s."

The separation of the judiciary, being handled by the Supreme Court, will take more than six years, he said.

Moudud, who held several ministerial and state positions under different governments since the late 1970s, focused on a raft of topical issues in the interview.

Illustrating reasons for the delay in separation of the judiciary, he said replacement of the 600 administrative staff carrying out judicial responsibilities presented the key area of problem.

The phasing out of the administrative officers from the judicial service would take at least six to



Moudud Ahmed

seven years, he said, adding the West Bengal state of India took 15 years to complete the process.

Is not six years a long time for the replacement of 600 officers?

"What I've said is the shortest possible time," he said.

There is also a shortage of about 210 judicial officers which is presenting a drag on our efforts to provide the courts with judges, he added.

Moudud, however, stressed that the government would work flat

out to deliver its pledge. "There is no scope to renege on the promise," he said.

Why the government has appealed against a High Court directive not to detain people arrested on suspicion, a decision hailed by the commonman?

"We don't oppose the essence of the directive, we are challenging part of the court order - whether it can ask the government to bring amendment to a law within six months."

"Our question is whether a court can give a deadline to parliament to complete a legislation, the prime task of parliament, or whether it amounts to dictating terms to the legislative body. Many may argue that it may amount to an infringement on the sovereignty of parliament."

He, however, revealed that long before the court directive the government took an initiative to alter Sections 54 and 167 of the Criminal Procedure Code to minimise the abuse of the law. The home ministry is now scanning a draft law prepared on the basis of recommendations by the Law Commission.

Asked whether the draft law will

Showcause on 1400 institutions as none passed exams

MUSTAK HOSSAIN with AKTAR FARUK SHAHIN

The government has asked about 1,400 institutions without any successful candidate for public examinations last year to explain the educational downside.

The education ministry served showcause notices on 189 high schools, 128 colleges and 1,077 madrassahs, with a 15-day time limit for explanation. The others are vocational and business management institutions.

The ministerial action came after a survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics, which says none of the candidates from the institutions passed the public examinations, including SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate).

The survey report also says that about 8,000 educational institutions have below 20 per cent success rate for the 2002 examinations. The ministry plans to serve showcause notices on them as well.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia asked the education ministry to slash budgetary allocations in case the institutions failed to live up to expectations in a year.

Heads of the institutions were instructed to improve the standard of education in a year. If they fail, their institutions will be left out of

Monthly Pay Order (MPO).

The prime minister also directed the ministry to use the performance of examinees as a yardstick for budgetary allocation to the institutions.

The institutions that performed better will be provided with more budgets and those with poor track-record will be paid less. Khaleda told Education Minister Dr Osman Faruk recently, when he handed the survey report over to her.

Khaleda also advised him to form a survey team to make a set of recommendations, based on the results of public examinations. The team will comprise intellectuals, journalists, former teachers and members of the civility.

She expressed concern at the poor performance of the educational institutions and blamed the educational downside on teachers and the bad management.

The prime minister asked the ministry to maintain transparency and accountability in disbursement of government allocation to non-government teachers.

Our Barisal Correspondent adds: As many as 98 educational institutions in Barisal division were served with showcause notices and asked to perform well within a year.

Of them, 23 are high schools, 73 are madrassahs, one SSC vocational institution and one business management institute.

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