

Lush paddy fields filled with death & despair

AFP, Yogyakarta

The old woman, already bent double with age, cried out for help from anyone who passed. She wanted to look for her sister, buried by the earthquake in the rubble of their house.

"Elder sister, elder sister," she mumbled as she wept in the shade of a tree near her ruined home. The woman, who gave her name as Purkasih, said her sister Duljiah was trapped in the kitchen.

About a dozen young men, some with swollen faces and gaping cuts in their legs, tried desperately to clear the rubble. Finally they found Duljiah, dead under the wreckage.

Indonesian coast was once dotted with houses along the sprawling paddy fields and lush groves of green. Now, nearly everywhere, there are piles of rubble and destruction.

"There is only one house remaining standing here," said Ngadiyo, 63, crouching in front of the ruins of his house in the hamlet of Suren Wetan in the central part of Bantul district, one of the areas worst-hit by the quake.

"Even that is not safe any more," he said.

His elder brother, Jodi Riwono, 46, sat on part of a collapsed wall, covered in bruises.

"I have never gone through an earthquake this strong during my entire life," Riwono said.

He awakened with his lower body trapped by rubble but his upper body was intact, protected by a space created by a falling beam that had got stuck on a cupboard.

"I don't have many years to live," he said, explaining why he had refused calls by passing neighbours to flee north amid rumours that tidal waves were forming off the coast. "But if I have to die, then I will die here."

Slowly, he said, he disengaged his legs from the wreckage but lost consciousness. Finally he was rescued by a grandson.

"I thank God that I am allowed more time to live," Riwono said.

The earthquake that struck off the southern coast of Java island killed at least 1,700 people, injured

thousands more and caused mass destruction.

Thousands of families fled their homes in panic after the 6.2 magnitude quake struck early in the morning, many running for higher ground amid false rumours of a tsunami like the one that devastated the country in December 2004.

But Bakit, an 18-year-old high school student with the side of his face badly swollen and bruised, said running anywhere was impossible.

"Even us healthy men could not see if we could run - because of the dust raised by the falling houses," he said. "I was thrown by the quake and could only crawl out as everything was falling around me."



Villagers carry an earthquake victim during a mass funeral in Bantul, Yogyakarta yesterday. At least 2,914 people were killed and thousands injured when a strong earthquake rocked Indonesia's densely-populated island of Java.

Detention of Suu Kyi extended

AP, Yangon

Ignoring international pressure, Myanmar's military government refused to release pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi Saturday, ordering the Nobel laureate's yearslong house arrest to continue, a government official said.

The junta's action, not yet officially announced, leaves Myanmar at odds with the United States and most Western nations, who have isolated the Asian nation since Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won a general election in 1990 but was barred by the military from taking power.

Suu Kyi, 60, who has spent about 10 of the last 17 years in detention, was most recently taken into custody on May 30, 2003, after her motorcade was attacked by a pro-junta mob as she was making a political tour of northern Myanmar.

India, Pakistan agree on joint survey of marsh

AFP, New Delhi

Nuclear rivals India and Pakistan ended two days of talks Friday and agreed to conduct a joint survey of a disputed marshland considered of little strategic value, a spokesman said.

The two rivals have met several times to work out a way to demarcate the disputed strip of marshland that separates India's western Gujarat state from Pakistan's Sindh province.

Although considered to be of little strategic value to either side, it has been the scene of heavy fighting between the hostile neighbours.

"Both sides agreed to conduct the joint survey of the Sir Creek and adjoining areas and waters between November and March 2007," Indian foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said.

He added that negotiations on marsh area will resume in August.

Technical experts from both countries will meet in Pakistan in August to work out the details for a joint survey, he said.

Others, however, described the talks as "fruitless."

"Both sides have been talking of a joint survey for years but nothing tangible has come through," said an Indian defence ministry official who participated in the two-day talks.



An elderly woman lies injured among other residents on a truck following an earthquake in Yogyakarta, in Central Java yesterday. At least 2,914 people were killed when the strong earthquake rocked the densely-populated southern coast of Indonesia's Central Java.

Indonesian quake prompts swift offers of aid, condolences

AFP, Yogyakarta

The devastating earthquake which left thousands dead in Indonesia prompted swift offers of aid and condolences from around the world on Saturday.

UN chief Kofi Annan led those expressing sadness and said a UN disaster response team was ready to help with humanitarian relief.

"The secretary-general is deeply saddened by the loss of life, the hundreds of injuries and the destruction suffered by the people of Indonesia after the earthquake that struck Yogyakarta on the southern coast of Java," a UN spokesman said.

Britain and France also offered a quick response to the disaster, which left more than 2,800 people dead and in and around the historic city of Yogyakarta.

"We're geared up to give any help that is required as soon we're asked to, and when we are asked, we will respond very, very quickly," said British Secretary of State for International Development Hilary Benn.

Russian President Vladimir Putin offered his condolences along with Chinese President Hu Jintao and

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano.

The European Commission said it would release up to three million euros (3.8 million dollars) in emergency aid in response to the devastating earthquake.

"We are ready to help the victims of this tragedy and recognise how important it is to do it as speedily as possible," said EU Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel.

The United Nations Children's Fund said it was preparing emergency aid for survivors including 2,000 tents and 9,000 tarpaulins.

Japan said it was sending a relief team and was ready to provide aid.

A team of about seven people including doctors and bureaucrats would head to Indonesia on Sunday to assess the needs, a foreign ministry official said.

"If the government of Indonesia makes a formal request, we will respond," he said. "The Japanese government is always ready to help."

Malaysia, which neighbours Indonesia, also said it would send a search and rescue team and medical supplies.

Hamas rejects deadline on recognition of Israel

Paramilitaries back on Gaza streets

REUTERS, AFP, Gaza

Hamas yesterday rejected a deadline set by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to accept a plan that indirectly calls for recognition of Israel, which he has threatened to put to a referendum.

Abbas had stunned the Islamist militant group, which won an election in January, by giving it 10 days to accept the plan, and talks had been expected to begin on Saturday.

But Sami Abu-Zuhri, a Hamas spokesman, said they would be delayed, adding:

"There is no need for the 10-day idea. As long as we are talking about dialogue, there shouldn't be any dates set."

Abbas says he will hold the vote within 40 days if Hamas does not accept the plan, which calls for a Palestinian state alongside Israel if Israel withdraws from occupied territories, and was drawn up by Palestinian leaders jailed by Israel.

Abu-Zuhri said the sides had also not agreed on a slate of negotiators or a venue.

Hamas, whose charter calls for

Israel's destruction, has already rejected the plan.

But its continued refusal to renounce violence or recognize Israel has triggered severe international pressure, including a financial boycott that has threatened to bankrupt the Palestinian Authority.

Yasser Abed Rabbo, an official close to Abbas, said the Palestinian president would invite Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas and other top officials to discuss the plan on Sunday.

Abed Rabbo cautioned that Abbas had the authority to dismiss the Hamas government.

A power struggle between Abbas's Fatah and Hamas, which defeated Fatah in a January parliamentary poll, has intensified in recent weeks, raising fears of a civil war.

Tension flared anew on Saturday when several dozen members of a 3,000-strong Hamas-led militia, which Abbas wants disbanded, were redeployed in Gaza a day after being taken off the streets.

They took up positions on several commercial avenues in Gaza City, witnesses said.

"We have again deployed mem-

bers of the force at major points in Gaza after a decision by interior minister Said Siam," a local commander told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Dozens of paramilitaries were seen by an AFP correspondent patrolling the centre of Gaza City.

Youssef al-Zahar, a leader of the force, said it had staged a "limited deployment" in response to citizens' requests.

The Palestinian Interior Ministry confirmed it had decided to partially redeploy the forces.

The peace plan drawn up by Palestinian prisoners calls for a two-state solution once Israel withdraws all its forces from the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem, captured in a 1967 war.

Despite its rejection by Hamas, the document has carried weight because the prisoners, jailed for violence against Israelis, are regarded as heroes by many Palestinians.

Israel has not responded to the plan and has vowed to set borders with Palestinian territory unilaterally unless peace talks can be resumed within months.

Senior Taliban leaders among 5 killed in raid

REUTERS, Kabul

US-led troops in Afghanistan killed five Taliban insurgents, including some key leaders, in an attack on a training facility, the US military said yesterday.

The military did not identify those killed during Friday night's strike, the latest in a mounting wave of violence, which was launched in the village of Qala Sak of southern Helmand province, near the border with Pakistan.

"Among those killed were key senior leaders of the Taliban network who have conducted attacks against coalition and Afghan forces, Afghan officials and civilians," the military said in a statement.

"This was a highly successful mission based on solid tactical intelligence and coordinated joint ground and indirect fires," it said, quoting US military spokesman Lt. Col. Paul Fitzpatrick.

Pacific 'Ring of Fire' unleashes another killer quake

AFP, Jakarta

The earthquake that rocked Java yesterday was the latest disaster in a part of the world known as the Pacific "Ring of Fire" that has seen a burst of seismic and volcanic activity this year.

Whether on land or undersea, the volatile edges of the north Pacific, bounded by the east Asian rim and the west coast of the Americas, are alive with near-constant seismic activity.

Some of the most dramatic natural disasters of recent history have happened within the Ring's arc, which stretches from Chile, north to Alaska and then west to encompass Japan, Southeast

Asia and the Pacific islands.

From the nuclear-like explosion of Krakatoa volcano off the coast of Indonesia in 1883 to the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster that killed 220,000 in late 2004 the Ring's awesome power is legend.

The eruption of Mount St Helens in the United States in 1980, the freak quake that felled San Francisco in 1906 and the one that devastated Kobe, Japan, in 1995, were all part of the Ring's devastating toll.

Since the start of the year there has been an increase in seismic activity with dozens of earthquakes and a volcanic eruption within the Ring.

India, Bodo rebels start talks for truce extension

REUTERS, Guwahati

Indian officials and leaders of a powerful tribal separatist group from the restive northeastern state of Assam began talks on Saturday to push forward a peace process by extending a year-old truce.

The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), which has been fighting for a separate homeland for ethnic Bodos since 1985, said it was keen to extend their first-ever truce agreed in May 2005.

"We have started negotiations and we are keen to proceed with the peace process and explore the possibility of extending the ceasefire," B. Swmikhur, general secretary of NDFB, told Reuters over phone from New Delhi.

"But extension of the truce will depend on the attitude of the government of India," said Swmikhur, who is leading a five-member team meeting officials in the capital for a day.

15 killed in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

At least 15 people were killed in Iraq yesterday as the country's political leaders again failed to reach agreement on who should head the key defense and interior ministries.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had pledged earlier this week that the appointments would be made by Saturday, but a parliament source said the rival factions could still not agree.

"Because there is no agreement on the appointments the (parliament) session scheduled for Saturday... will not go forward," said the source.

Parliament was expected to reconvene on Sunday, but there was no indication that the posts would be filled during the session.

The two ministries have been without permanent heads since the December election and Maliki has been unable to secure a compromise despite forming the rest of his broad-based 37-member cabinet a week ago.

Rivalries among Iraq's sectarian and ethnic groups have prevented a consensus on the security chiefs, who will be charged with reining in the sectarian and insurgent violence plaguing the country.



A scared and mourning East Timorese woman passes a burning car as she flees her house after it was set on fire by attackers during an ethnic dispute in Villa Verde area of Dili yesterday between native Western Timorese and Eastern Timorese.

Dozens of houses torched in East Timor

AP, Dili

Militias armed with machetes burned dozens of houses in East Timor's capital Saturday, sending women and children screaming and fleeing, as foreign troops struggled to stop violence that threatened to plunge the tiny nation into civil war.

Hundreds of panicked residents sought shelter in churches, schools and embassies, as Australian troops arrived in tanks to try to restore order. The number of casualties wasn't known, but several ambulances raced through the streets with sirens blaring.

The gangs are apparently allied with police and former soldiers angered by the dismissal in March of 600 soldiers more than 40 percent of the country's army after they went on a monthlong strike to protest poor working conditions.