

54 miners feared dead in Jharkhand after blast

REUTERS, Dhanbad

At least 54 miners were feared dead in Jharkhand after the roof of a state-owned coal mine collapsed following an explosion, a mine official said on Thursday.

The incident took place in the Dhanbad district of late on Wednesday.

As many as 57 miners had entered the mine in the western Jharia area, about 170 km north of Ranchi, when a blast to open up a new mining area caused the roof collapse, releasing deadly methane gas, the official said.

"This is an unprecedented situation and the chances of their survival are zero," Partha Bhattacharya, chairman of Bharat Coking Coal Limited, told Reuters.

"The miners were working at a depth of 460 metres when the explosion and the gas leak reduced the oxygen level to almost zero," Bhattacharya, whose state-run firm owns the mine, said.

Rescue operations were launched overnight, but Bhattacharya said rescuers had only been able to get past level three of the 18-level mine. The 54 miners were believed to be trapped in the last level.

Rescuers said a fire in the mine, triggered by the blast, had made their task tougher.

Nepal plans to give millions citizenship

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal plans to grant citizenship to millions of people living in the country by changing a law, which only gave that right to children whose father was a Nepali, a government minister said yesterday.

Under present law, children — whose mothers are Nepali but fathers are foreigners — are not recognised as nationals of the Himalayan nation.

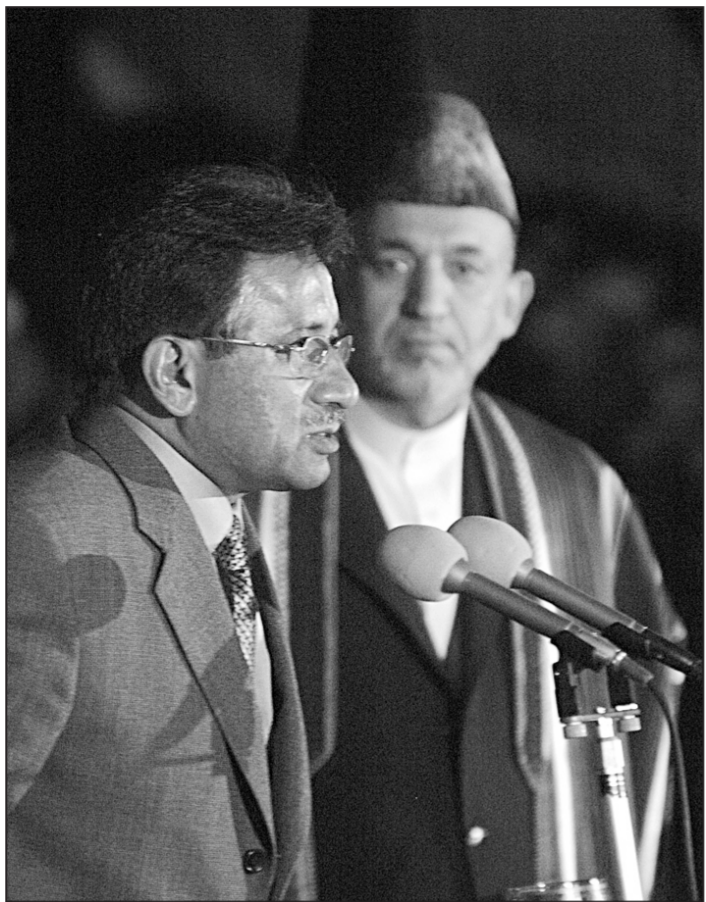
While they have residency rights, they cannot work, own businesses or have property rights, forcing most to falsify official documents and use fake names.

Industry Minister Hridayesh Tripathi said a draft law had been finalised allowing children born before April 13, 1990 — when Nepal ended decades of absolute monarchy and established democracy — to gain citizenship if either parent was Nepali.

"This is a big decision," Tripathi told Reuters. "If implemented honestly this will resolve an old problem which was getting complex every year," he said.

The change would benefit up to six million people mainly living in Nepal's southern plains whose problem was ignored by subsequent governments, Tripathi said.

Most are children of female migrant workers and prostitutes who regularly cross the 1,750-km open border with India under a 55-year-old treaty which allows nationals of the two countries to live and do business in the other's territory.



Visiting Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) speaks during a joint press conference while his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai looks on at the Presidential Palace in Kabul Wednesday.

MUSHARRAF TO KARZAI

Islamabad, Kabul must join hands to crush Taliban

REUTERS, Kabul

Islamabad and Kabul must stop playing blame games in the battle against the resurgent Taliban and work together to crush the group on both sides of the border, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday.

Musharraf urged Afghanistan to put aside past rows over cross-border infiltration and work with Pakistan on a new strategy to combat the Taliban. Violence across Afghanistan is at its worst since the 2001 US-led invasion.

The Pakistani leader wound up two days of talks with Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai which analysts say were aimed at easing tensions caused by the headline Islamists, their al-Qaeda allies and others operating from Pakistani border areas.

"Certainly, I completely agree that al-Qaeda and the Taliban are operating both in Pakistan and Afghanistan," Musharraf said in a speech to community and political leaders ahead of the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks on

the United States.

"Certainly, there are some who are crossing from Pakistan to Afghanistan," he said, adding this was not sponsored by the Pakistani government. "This blame game has to stop. We have to stop this blame game on both sides ... and trust each other."

Rebels freely cross the rugged, mountainous frontier and some Afghan leaders accuse Islamabad of not doing enough to stop them, or even of continuing to support its former protege, the Taliban.

Islamabad says it does all it can and on Tuesday struck a deal with pro-Taliban rebels in a tribal region under which they agreed to stop raids in both Pakistan and its neighbour.

The two leaders issued a joint statement committing to cooperating against militants, infiltration and "Talibanisation," a reference to headline Islam.

Musharraf said the priority was to break the Taliban's command structure, headed by Mullah Muhammad Omar from his base in the southern Afghan province of

Kandahar, where Nato forces began their biggest anti-guerrilla offensive on Saturday.

Home from a tour of Afghanistan, Nato's top commander of operations, General James Jones, said on Thursday the alliance had been taken back by the extent of the fighting since taking over the south from US troops in July and urged reinforcements.

"We are talking about modest reinforcements," Jones told a news briefing at Nato's European military headquarters in Mons, Belgium, saying commanders on the ground wanted several hundred extra troops, more helicopters and more transport planes.

"While some of it (violence) is predictable, we should recognize we are a little bit surprised at the level of intensity, and (the fact) that the opposition in some areas are not relying on traditional hit-and-run tactics," Jones said.

Nato chiefs of staff would discuss the issue on Friday and Saturday, he said, adding he was confident of early results.

US refuses to endorse Pakistan-Taliban border deal

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday refused to endorse but did not criticise a peace deal between Pakistan and pro-Taliban Islamic militants in a restive tribal area bordering Afghanistan.

Pushed for a US response to the accord, which affects Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal belt, White House spokesman Tony Snow replied: "We've been apprised of it" and added that "it does not provide great concern."

Pakistan has assured the United States that "the cease-fire is, in fact, not going to diminish efforts to apprehend Osama bin Laden or bring him to justice," or open the border to al-Qaeda terrorists, said Snow.

Afghanistan has expressed concerns about the arrangement, under which Islamabad agreed to reduce its military presence, while the militants agreed to disarm or expel foreign al-Qaeda-linked fighters.

Under the accord, Pakistan would consult tribal leaders before launching ground and air strikes against suspected militants.

The pact came as Nato-led forces stepped up their offensive against an increasingly intransigent Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

The peace deal aims to end two years of violence in the semi-autonomous tribal zone of North Waziristan, where hundreds of people have died in clashes between security forces and Islamist rebels.

"It is part of the (Pakistani) government's efforts to eliminate extremism in border areas by addressing root causes through security, political and economic development," said Snow.

Pakistan has some 80,000 troops along the border with Afghanistan to hunt down Taliban militants and al-Qaeda fugitives, who were believed to have sneaked into the rugged region after the US ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001.

But some Islamist insurgents are still able to enter Afghanistan, with Afghan and some foreign officials alleging that Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders based in Pakistan are training the militants and sending them over.

Lanka resettles Muslims displaced by conflict

Troops dig in

AFP, Colombo

Thousands of Muslims who fled their homes in this coastal district began returning home yesterday as fighting between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels died down, officials said.

Some 85 busses transported refugees within this district from relief centres in Kantalai and take them to their homes in the Muslim fishing town of Muttur.

"We started the process today in a big way because the fighting has died down in those areas," a spokesman for President Mahinda Rajapakse's office said in Colombo, 260km from here.

"More civilians want to return." Officials here said about 10,000 Muslims had been moved out of relief centres within the district and taken home.

"Two refugee welfare centres closed today and seven more are functioning, but they have less than 5,000 people in them," a district official said.

Heavy fighting between soldiers and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in August at Muttur, just 10 kilometres (six miles) across Koddidiyar Bay, forced 40,000 civilians to flee the town and surrounding areas.

Action Against Hunger, a French charity, lost 17 local staff in the fighting when they were shot dead at Muttur in early August.

The Nordic monitors of a ceasefire agreed in 2002 have accused government troops of carrying out the massacre. The

government has denounced the allegations as "outrageous" and blamed the Tigers.

An upsurge in fighting since December in the north and east has claimed more than 1,500 lives in Sri Lanka, which has suffered from a bitter three-decade-old ethnic conflict.

The resettlement got underway after security forces wrested control Monday of the town of Sampur at the southern edge of Trincomalee from the rebels who had used it as a major staging point for their attacks.

The government took a large number of journalists to Sampur to demonstrate that security forces were in control of the area.

Soldiers were seen clearing the carcasses of dead animals in Sampur and setting up bunkers and defence lines.

Thousands of civilians in Sampur had fled the fighting, travelling further south, and had not yet returned.

The military maintains its eastern naval and airforce commands within the Trincomalee harbour area.

The Tiger rebels warned last week that the ceasefire would be off if the military captured Sampur.

Since Sampur's fall on Monday, the guerrillas have not said if they will back away from the 2002 truce.

But on Wednesday the LTTE told peacebroker Norway there could be retaliation for the military's intense air raids on rebel positions within Trincomalee district that followed the capture of the town.

Millions mark centenary of Indian national song amid Muslim dissent

AFP, New Delhi

Politicians and millions of school children sang out Thursday to celebrate the 100th anniversary of a controversial national song which has split Hindu and Muslim leaders.

The Congress party-led government had asked schools to voluntarily mark the centenary of the adoption of "Vande Mataram" — "I bow to you, mother" — as the national song by having children countryside sing the verses.

But the main opposition Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ordered compulsory singing in five states under its rule, angering Muslims who say the song, which worships India as a goddess, goes against their religion.

On Thursday, BJP party leaders were at the centre of the celebrations in a show of support for the song. But some drew a blank when asked on private news network

CNN-IBN what the verses meant. Others did not know the verses at all.

The song's title was the slogan used during India's independence movement against British colonial rule and is separate from the national anthem.

In the most populous state Uttar Pradesh, Muslim leaders and students assembled in the capital Lucknow to sing another popular song in praise of India, "Sare jahan se achha Hindustan hamara" or "Our India is the best in the world."

"Singing 'Vande Mataram' is against our religion. But we don't want to be seen as unpatriotic so we sang this song which has the same spirit and flavour," said cleric Khalid Rashid.

On Sunday, the country's most powerful Sunni Islam seminary asked Muslims not to send their children to school Thursday to avoid singing the song.

Maoists bring Nepali capital to a standstill

AFP, Kathmandu

Tens of thousands of Maoist rebel supporters brought the centre of Nepal's capital to a standstill Wednesday with a massive rally at which union leaders pledged to protect workers' rights in a new democracy.

The crowds, carrying banners proclaiming "Long live the Maoists," chanted anti-monarchy slogans as they assembled at an open-air theatre for a general meeting of the All Nepal Trade Union Federation (Revolutionary), a group affiliated with the rebels.

"Even after democracy has been restored, the workers are still exploited

and live like second-class citizens," federation vice chairman Badri Bajrai told the peaceful crowd.

"We will fight collectively for their rights and our movement will continue until we see positive changes," he said.

The crowd listened to the trade unionists' speeches under the gaze of a couple of dozen riot police who made no effort to prevent the meeting.

Later Wednesday, Nepal's King Gyanendra was expected to make a rare public appearance at a religious festival in the capital, but all traffic in the centre had been brought to a stop by the massive crowds.



PHOTO: AFP

Chief Minister of the Indian state of Delhi Sheila Dikshit (R) sings the national song 'Vande Mataram' along with her cabinet colleagues at the Delhi secretariat in New Delhi yesterday. The national song about freedom from British rule, which equates India with the Hindu goddess of power, Durga, has unleashed a storm with Hindus and Muslims divided over whether it should be sung in public.

Taliban retake volatile Afghan district in south

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban militants have seized control of a volatile district in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, a senior police official said yesterday.

The Taliban had taken control of Garmser district after police left the area in a "tactical" withdrawal, said provincial police chief Mohammad Nabi Mullah Khail.

"We have made a tactical (retreat). We will take control of the district again," he told AFP.

Earlier a purported Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi claimed in a telephone call from an unknown location that Taliban fighters took Garmser district late Wednesday and

were still holding it.

Mullah Khail, however, insisted there was no Taliban attack and no fighting for Garmser.

The militants held Garmser in July for up to 48 hours, before being driven out by coalition and Afghan troops.

Supporters of the former Taliban regime which was toppled in a US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 have stepped up an insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan this year.

There are almost daily attacks against NATO and coalition forces, Afghan army, police and non-governmental organizations.

A firefight with police in Zurmat

district in southeastern Paktia province on Wednesday left four Taliban dead and three wounded, local police chief Abdul Hanan Raufi said.

"Police ambushed a group of 10 Taliban troublemakers in the area, four were killed and three wounded and one was arrested," Ruffi said, adding that others managed to escape.

One policeman was wounded in the clash that lasted 45 minutes, he said.

Also on Wednesday six Taliban were wounded in southern Ghazni province in a two-hour battle with police, provincial government spokesman Mohammad Ali Fakof said.