



PHOTO: AFP
This hand out photo released by the Aceh and Nias Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR) shows an aerial view of flooded houses and a mosque in Aceh Tamiang, East Aceh yesterday.

94 die in Indonesia, Malaysian floods

AP, Banda Aceh

At least 94 people were killed and dozens left missing by floods in Indonesia and Malaysia, officials said. Looting broke out in areas of Malaysia abandoned because of rising waters.

An aerial view from an aid flight over the worst-hit region on Indonesia's Sumatra island showed many houses submerged, while only the roofs of others were visible. Some families were trapped on the roofs of their homes.

The death toll from more than three days of rain-triggered flooding on Sumatra was at least 87, with dozens others reported missing, while seven people have been killed in neighbouring Malaysia,

officials said.

More than 150,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in both countries.

The worst hit region was in Tamiyang district in Aceh province in Northern Sumatra, where rescuers found 60 bodies on Sunday, said Nurdin Jos, an Aceh government spokesman.

Aceh was the region worst hit by the 2004 Asian tsunami, but this week's flooding was in areas unaffected by that disaster.

Another official said 13 more people, mostly children, were killed elsewhere, adding to 14 confirmed dead on Saturday. State news agency Antara reported 114 people killed, but gave no attribution.

In Malaysia, nearly 70,000 evacuees were in public shelters in

Johor state, about 10,000 in Malacca and 5,760 in Pahang, the Bernama news agency said.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called on people to help prevent looting in the flooded areas by making citizen's arrests, the report said.

"There are looting incidents but not that rampant," Abdullah was quoted as saying. "We cannot wait for the police to act. The public and the volunteers must help."

Officials were not immediately available to confirm the report.

The flooding, which followed unusually heavy rainfall, is reportedly the worst in living memory in some areas.

The weather was expected to improve this week, the department said.

Israeli ministers ask govt to respond to rocket attacks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli ministers urged a response to continuing rocket fire from Gaza yesterday, as two more rockets were fired into the Jewish state by militants inside the coastal strip in a new breach of a nearly month-old truce between the army and gunmen.

"It is not certain that preventing the army from acting against Qassam fire does in fact work in favour of the moderates" in the Palestinian territories, Defence Minister Amir Peretz told the weekly cabinet meeting, referring to the home-made rockets fired by Gaza militants.

"The fire plays into the hands of those who boast their actions and see it as an achievement," said Peretz, who was quoted by a senior Israeli official.

Earlier Sunday, two rockets were fired into Israel, without causing injuries or damage, with the ultra-radical Islamic Jihad group claiming responsibility in Gaza City.

Under a ceasefire agreed by Israel and militants on November 26, the Jewish state withdrew its forces from the coastal strip while militants pledged to stop firing rockets.

Since then, however, at least 48 rockets have been fired into Israel, and one Palestinian has been killed and at least three wounded by Israeli fire in Gaza.

Last week, Israeli ministers began to call for the Jewish state to respond to the rocket attacks, and they continued to do so at Sunday's cabinet meeting.

"Israel must consider an extensive and decisive operation to stop the rocket fire with an emphasis on the heads of the terror organizations," said Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former defence minister from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima party.

"A decision must be taken as soon as possible," said Mofaz, who was also quoted by an official.

Peretz told his cabinet colleagues that the army was identifying the rocket-launching cells, but not firing back at them.

Public Security Minister Avi Dichter demanded that the army "open fire toward the Qassam launching cells even before they fire the rockets."

Many of the rockets land in open fields, without causing damage or injuries, but cabinet ministers said the Israeli army should respond nonetheless.

"We must target anyone who fires towards Israel," an official quoted Trade Minister Eli Yishai, from the ultra-orthodox Shas party, as telling the cabinet.

"We can't allow them to make a joke out of Israel. Thank God nothing has happened so far, but we shouldn't wait for something to happen."

Channel Tunnel 'under threat of attack'

AFP, London

The Channel Tunnel is under threat of attack from Islamist militants over the Christmas holiday period, British weekly newspaper The Observer said yesterday, citing French and US security services.

The alleged plot came to the attention of the French overseas intelligence service the DGSE, possibly via the US Central Intelligence Agency, and was detailed in a secret December 19 report to the Paris government.

French and British intelligence services have since run checks of security systems protecting the 31-mile (50-kilometre) tunnel but the DGSE warned that the threat level remains high, the newspaper said.

Even before the alleged threat, British security services were on the second-highest alert -- "severe" -- following what police said was an attempt by Islamist militants to blow up transatlantic passenger jets in August.

7 killed as Darfur rebels, govt forces clash

REUTERS, Khartoum

Fighting between Darfur rebels and government forces near the northern town of Kutum has killed seven people and insurgents said yesterday they shot down two army helicopters in the area.

Despite a May peace deal, violence has increased in Sudan's remote west after rebels who reject the accord formed a military alliance and renewed hostilities with the government.

"The government troops and Janjaweed militia attacked our positions and then attacked a village, killing five men and ... two women," Darfur rebel commander Jar el-Neby told Reuters via satellite telephone.

He said the government and their allied militia, known locally as Janjaweed, attacked rebel positions near Kutum three days ago and the village of el-Goba, about 16km east of Kutum town, on Friday.

In a separate statement sent to Reuters on Sunday, Darfur rebel official Esam el-Din Hajj said the insurgents had shot down two army helicopters during the clashes.



PHOTO: AFP
Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (C) smiles as Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is greeted by his wife Eliza prior to a meeting at Olmert's official residency in Jerusalem Saturday.

North Korea vows fight against US sanction

AP, Seoul

North Korean state media praised the country's leader Sunday for standing up to its enemies a day after the army's chief of staff vowed to take action against US sanctions after nuclear disarmament talks ended in deadlock.

In a lengthy editorial, the Rodong Sinmun newspaper lauded North Korean leader Kim Jong Il for his "iron-like pluck and grit" and for trying to build a powerful military that no enemy would dare confront, the North's Korean Central News Agency said.

The newspaper also said the North displayed its determination to "mercilessly punish aggressors trying to pick a fight with us" a possible reference to its Oct. 9 nuclear test that sent jitters across the globe.

On Saturday, army chief of staff Kim Yong Chun accused the United States of demanding that North Korea unilaterally end its nuclear program while refusing to lift financial restrictions the US imposed on the communist government for its alleged money laundering and counterfeiting of \$100 bills.

The nuclear talks held in Beijing this week after a 13-month break due to a North Korean boycott over the US sanctions ended Friday without an agreement to move ahead on the North's nuclear disarmament. Last year, the North pledged to disarm in exchange for security guarantees and aid.

Negotiators said the North Koreans refused to talk about their nuclear weapons program until the US lifts its financial restrictions.

Iran has right to peaceful nuke programme: India

AFP, New Delhi

Nuclear-armed and energy-hungry India said yesterday that Iran had a right to pursue a nuclear energy programme, and said the crisis over Tehran's suspect ambitions should be resolved by dialogue.

"Iran has the right to pursue its nuclear programme for peaceful civilian use. It has undertaken certain obligations that its nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes," the Indian foreign ministry said.

The statement was issued the day after the UN Security Council adopted a resolution, which imposes restrictions on Iran's nuclear industry and ballistic missile programme, its first ever sanctions against Tehran.

"We have noted the passage of the UN Security Council Resolution and are studying its implications," the India foreign ministry said.

India has been eyeing Iran's huge gas reserves, but its ties with Tehran have suffered after it sided with the West in voting against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

India has also signed a landmark civilian nuclear deal with the United States, under which India -- a non-signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) -- will get nuclear fuel and technology for the first time in more than 30 years, since it tested a nuclear device.

The US Congress this month

cleared the agreement, asking for India's participation in US efforts to "dissuade, isolate, and, if necessary, sanction and contain Iran."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government has come under severe attack for the law's provision on Iran.

The Indian statement also

repeated calls for negotiations.

"We continue to feel that all possible efforts should be made to address the Iranian nuclear issue by peaceful means through dialogue and negotiation," it said, adding the IAEA "should play a central role in resolving outstanding issues."



PHOTO: AFP
Chinese Ambassador Wang Guangya votes on sanctions against Iran Saturday at UN headquarters in New York City. The unanimously adopted resolution mandates that "all states shall freeze the funds, other financial assets and economic resources" owned by people or entities linked to "Iran's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities or the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems."

Myanmar rebel leader dies after long illness

REUTERS, Mae Sot

A veteran leader of Myanmar's ethnic Karen rebel movement, which is fighting one of the world's longest-running insurgencies, has died aged 79, rebel officials said yesterday.

General Bo Mya, whose Karen National Union (KNU) has waged guerrilla war against the central government since 1949, died late on Saturday in a Thai hospital near the border of eastern Myanmar, a senior KNU official told Reuters.

"He passed away after suffering from several diseases so severe that he could not walk for three years," said the official, who declined to be named.

KNU general secretary Mhan Sa La Pah said the funeral would probably take place on December 26 in a Karen stronghold near the Thai border. "General Bo Mya died last night. His condition got worse in the last two days. He couldn't eat and had a sore throat. We had planned to move him to a hospital in Bangkok," Man Sa La Pah said.

Search for other worlds to step up with launch of French planet hunter

AFP, Paris

A 12-year-old quest to find planets orbiting other stars gets a big boost this week with the launch of a French-made spacecraft that may help reveal a home-from-home for our descendants.

Bearing a 30-centimetre (12-inch) telescope and two cameras, Corot is designed to hunt for "rocky" planets -- the first requirement, along with liquid water and a moderate temperature, for life as we know it.

Corot, pronounced "Coreau," is due to lift off on Wednesday aboard a Russian Soyuz-Fregat rocket from Baikonur, Kazakhstan.

The 170-million-euro (221-million-dollar) mission, 75-per cent funded by France's National Centre for Space Studies (CNES), should open up a new front in the search for extrasolar planets.

"It's a small project, launched with few resources, but it is a pathfinder which will show future missions which kind of star to search," Annie Baglin of the Paris-Meudon Observatory, who is Corot's chief scientist, told AFP.

In 1995, two astronomers at the Geneva Observatory, Michel Mayor and Didier Queloz, spotted

a planet orbiting the star 51 Pegasi, about 50 light years away.

It was the first extrasolar planet ever recorded -- although, in truth, the sighting was indirect. Light from 51 Pegasi "wobbled" because it was deflected by gravitation around the large, Jupiter-sized planet.

Since then, 209 extrasolar planets have been spotted in 170 solar systems, and the tally is growing by around two planets per month.

Besides the popular "wobble" method, astronomers can deduce planets as they cross directly in front of their star -- the transit method, used by Corot -- and by "gravitational lensing."

Predicted by Einstein in 1912, lensing occurs when a star with a planet passes directly in front of a background star and magnifies the light from that star in a way that reveals the presence of the planet.

Astronomers had broadly expected extrasolar systems to be like our own -- there would be a star with a clutch of smaller "rocky" (i.e. solid) planets orbiting at close range and, much farther out, "gas giants", or huge planets of deep-chilled gas that take years to complete an orbit.

New Pentagon chief briefs Bush on Iraq

7 Iraqi cops, 2 GIs killed

AP, AFP, Washington/ Baghdad

President Bush, drafting an overhaul of his faltering and unpopular war plan, heard Saturday from a Pentagon chief who had just returned from Iraq with a positive impression of Iraqi leaders' plans to address sectarian violence.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates finished his first week on the job by delivering a report to Bush on the three days he spent talking with Iraqi leaders, US commanders and American soldiers. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Peter Pace, who travelled with Gates to Iraq, helped make the presentation.

The early-morning meeting at Camp David in Maryland's mountains lasted about an hour. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, national security adviser Stephen Hadley and Hadley's deputy, JD Crouch, who is coordinating the administration's Iraq review, also participated.

White House officials declined to disclose any details of the conversations. Bush is meeting with his national security team again Thursday at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

"The president is pleased with the progress being made" to design a new policy, said Blain Rethmeier, a Bush spokesman. "The president is leaving all options on the table on the way forward."

With public support for the war falling as violence and US deaths rise, Bush has been eager to show he is ready to make changes even while he rejects calls from Democrats, who take control of Congress next month, for significant troop withdrawals to begin soon. The president has talked often in recent weeks about the long commitment America must make to Iraq.

He is expect to announce his revamped Iraq strategy in a speech to the nation between the New Year's Day and his Jan. 23 State of

the Union address.

"If you're serving on the front lines halfway across the world, it is natural to wonder what all this means for you," Bush said Saturday in his weekly radio address. "I want our troops to know that while the coming year will bring change, one thing will not change, and that is our nation's support for you and the vital work you do to achieve a victory in Iraq."

Meanwhile, seven Iraqi policemen were killed and another 20 wounded on Sunday when an explosion ripped through a police station in the war-torn province of Diyala, a police officer said.

Another two US soldiers have been killed in Iraq, the US military announced on Sunday.

One soldier was killed and four others were wounded on Saturday when a bomb exploded southeast of Baghdad, targeting a combat patrol searching for "suspected terrorists," the military said.