

Drought threatens north India with famine

BARMER, India, Apr 28 : Thousands of villagers are fleeing their homes in the face of a terrible drought that has brought the threat of famine to this barren region of northern India on the edge of the Thar desert, reports AFP.

Even toughened herders, used to a harsh life in remote areas of the desert state of Rajasthan, are abandoning their cattle and small farms for the food-rich neighbouring state of Punjab.

The worst drought to hit Rajasthan in more than 40 years has affected some 20 million people in 23,400 villages spanning 26 of the state's 32 districts.

Another 30 million are suffering in neighbouring Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh states, as well as the eastern state of Orissa and southern Andhra Pradesh.

Gurjard Kaur, chief administrator of the Rajasthan districts of Jodhpur, Barmer and Jaisalmer, painted a bleak picture.

"More than 80 percent of the region is in the grip of a severe drought. It is grim," Kaur told AFP in Jodhpur, some 650 kilometers (400 miles) south-west of the state capital Jaipur.

Kaur's anxious administration is working round the clock to ward off famine and stem migration, and is considering plans to draw water from the Himalayan foothills in northern Punjab.

"We have identified canals and we think we can pull this off," one official said.

Only 366 of the parched Rajasthan villages are currently receiving water from mobile tankers.

The state government has vilified down the migration of villagers, which it labels as the "routine migration" of nomadic herders.

"There have been no human deaths, but cattle are dying by the thousands," said state relief commissioner R. Meena.

Weather forecasts promise worse days ahead in May and June, when temperatures are expected to touch 50 Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit) and burn out remaining sub-soil moisture.

A quarter of the 2,000 people living in Dudhwa -- a cluster of seven villages in Barmer district -- have left their homes in the past three weeks.

"We are dying. We have no food, no water. The government has abandoned us and the gods have cursed us with this drought," said herder Purkha Ram.

Ram said he was forced to abandon his camels and sheep as the cost of their daily fodder had risen to 250 rupees (six dollars).

Rani (Eds: one name) walks three kilometers every day to fetch water and another five in search of milk for her two tiny children.

"My husband has left to find work. The drought is my partner now," she said.

Taje Ram, a storekeeper who now has no customers, said Dudhwa -- which translates as River of Milk -- drew its name from days when groundwater was just three feet (one meter) below the surface and the area's milk was renowned for its quality.

"It is all a dream now," he said, kicking at a trough into which water trickled from a camel-driven government water tank.

According to a local relief agency, Athuni, some 200,000 milk cows and 1.2 million sheep in the region are threatened by the drought.

In the past five days alone, at least 1,000 sheep and 140 cows died in just one cluster of 40 villages in Baityu county, Athuni spokesman Bal Singh Godora said.

The situation is equally grim in nearby Madasar county, which now has only 2,300 residents.

"Nearly half the people who lived here have left," said Krishna Ram, an old man now employed in one of the government-funded drought relief projects.

"We get just eight to ten rupees after a day's work in the open," Ram complained of the scheme which promised to pay four times as much.

Relief commissioner Meena insisted the state government was doing everything it could.

"We have set up cattle camps all over, where fodder is being provided for 70,000 cows, buffaloes and camels.

"We have already provided relief employment to 419,000 people and another 110,000 jobs are being organised," he said.



Dragan Nikolic Serb suspect pleads not guilty before war crimes tribunal

THE HAGUE, Apr 28 : Bosnian Serb Dragan Nikolic, the first veteran of the Bosnian war to be indicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal here, pleaded not guilty today to charges of crimes against humanity, reports AFP.

The indictment of Nikolic, 43, was the first to be publicly announced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in November 1994.

As former commander of the Bosnian Serbs' Susica prison camp, through which up to 8,000 Muslim prisoners passed between April and September 1992, Nikolic is accused of torturing 10 inmates with a bayonet and murdering eight others.

He is also accused of imprisoning and persecuting some 500 civilians held in Susica.

Farmers, war veterans report breakthrough

Cook condemns restriction on political activity in Zimbabwe

HARARE, Apr 28 : White farming leaders and the chief of the war veterans spearheading the invasions of their land reported a breakthrough in resolving the conflict in talks today, reports AFP.

"We have gone a long way today in resolving our problems as far as the land issue is concerned," Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU) vice president Nick Swanepoel said after the meeting.

Chenjerai Huzvi, leader of the war veterans, said: "Today's meeting has been very fruitful."

Swanepoel said they had agreed on three principles at the meeting.

-- "That the war veterans will stay on the farms, but it will be peaceful."

-- "The criminal element will be dealt with severely."

-- "Farmers must get on with the business of farming."

Huzvi promised to deal "severely" with the violence which has erupted during the invasion of about 1,000 white-owned farms by thousands of squatters.

Two white farmers and at least two black farm workers have been killed in the invasions, while many others have been beaten and had their homes or crops torched.

"Violence should stop forthwith. We should work together as Zimbabweans," Huzvi told the news conference.

The CFU and war veterans' delegations then left together to visit a farm in the Arcturus area near the capital Harare to tell squatters there that the violence must stop.

The two men said they had agreed to meet again, but did not say when.

Huzvi dismissed conditions set by the British government for funding of land reforms in talks with a Zimbabwean government delegation in London Thursday.

"London is not going to dictate terms to us. We are an independent state to take our own decisions," he said.

"London has not been a determining factor."

Asked whether he hoped Britain would nonetheless supply funds to finance the land reform programme, he said: "We are not looking forward to London alone. We are looking forward to everyone, to every donor."

He said, however, that "the issues of Zimbabwe will only be resolved by Zimbabweans."

"We have put together a programme which should make it possible to resettle the people as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook denounced today a police curb imposed on pre-election activity in Zimbabwe, after land reform talks the day before between London and Harare ended in stalemate.

The decision Thursday to limit political gatherings came on the same day that the government of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe pledged it would hold "fair and free elections" under international supervision.

Court declines to appoint guardian for Elian

MIAMI, Apr 28 : An appeal court in Atlanta, Georgia denied Thursday requests from Elian Gonzalez's Miami relatives to appoint a neutral court guardian acting on behalf of the Cuban boy and to let them visit Elian, a court spokesman said, reports AFP.

The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals agreed, however, to a third request presented by lawyers for Elian's Miami-based great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez, which prevents the six-year-old from entering premises that enjoy diplomatic immunity, such as a Cuban diplomat's residence.

On Wednesday, Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, stepped into the legal battle over his son, asking the Atlanta court to recognize him as Elian's sole legal representative in asylum appeals on his behalf, courts documents showed.

The three appeals court judges, however, postponed a decision on the father's request to replace Elian's great uncle as his "next friend", which would have paved the way for Juan Miguel Gonzalez to replace Elian's father in the lawsuit and then dismiss the boy's asylum request, allowing for them to return to Cuba.

An attorney for Lazaro Gonzalez, Richard Sharpstein, claimed Thursday it was unlikely that the father's request would be accepted by the court.

"The court hasn't ruled on that yet, and I don't think it will allow that," he said.

Sharpstein also acknowledged that "if he (the father) can convince the court to dismiss the case because the appeal is not necessary, then it would be over, and he could go wherever he wanted to go" with the boy.

The court's decision Thursday allows oral arguments on May 11 on Lazaro Gonzalez's court appeal on behalf of Elian to go forward.

"We especially are hesitant to permit intervention in an appeal where, as here, the date set and is near," two of the judges wrote.

The third judge acknowledged the father's interests in the case, he said his request was not timely and that the US immigration agency "adequately represents his interests."

The judges asked both lawyers for the government and the Miami family to file papers on Juan Miguel Gonzalez's request to replace the great uncle by May 16.

Hillary rival for NY Senate race diagnosed with cancer

NEW YORK, Apr 28 : New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced Thursday he had been diagnosed with a treatable form of prostate cancer that may require some time off from his Senate campaign against First Lady Hillary Clinton, reports AFP.

Speaking at a news conference here, Giuliani, 55, said he learned about the disease Wednesday from his doctor, who based his diagnosis on a series of medical tests that began about two and a half weeks ago.

"It's a very, very early stage of the disease," said a smiling Giuliani, who made a concerted effort to project an image of optimism and positive attitude about his chance for full recovery.

"Some forms of treatment would require taking some time off," he admitted, but he said he did not expect a pause in his campaign to be "significant" or last for months.

Giuliani and Clinton are campaigning to fill the US Senate seat to be vacated by veteran Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who announced plans to retire and endorsed the first lady for the job.

handle her husband be able to handle the matter privately.

The mayor said deciding on a course of treatment might take up to three weeks. He noted that his father, who died at age 73, also had prostate cancer. But he gave no clue about how the disease would affect his race against Hillary Clinton for the Senate seat.

"I have no idea," said the mayor, when asked how the disease would affect his campaign.

"In fairness to me, to the Senate race, to the Republican Party, to all the parties and everybody else, I need some time to think about it and I really need to know what course of treatment it is going to be," observed Giuliani.

"Some forms of treatment would require taking some time off," he admitted, but he said he did not expect a pause in his campaign to be "significant" or last for months.

Giuliani and Clinton are campaigning to fill the US Senate seat to be vacated by veteran Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who announced plans to retire and endorsed the first lady for the job.

Pakistan for reducing tensions with India

ISLAMABAD, Apr 28 : Pakistan yesterday said that New Delhi and Islamabad should work toward reducing tensions along the Line of Control and warned that if it was not done it could lead to a full-fledged war between the two countries, reports PTI.

"We have had experiences in the past that disproportionate reactions started a cycle of escalation ending in war neither side wanted. Therefore, the wise thing to do is to arrest the escalation of tensions along the LOC," Pakistan foreign minister Abdul Sattar said in an interview to American television network CNN.

He said that the situation is now much more dangerous than it ever was.

"I think we should recognise that the nuclearisation, the word nuclearisation of South Asia has greatly aggravated the dangers that existed before."



Afghan protestors carrying pictures and placards march in a protest rally against Afghanistan's ruling Taliban and all other fighting forces, in the Pakistani capital city Islamabad yesterday. Demonstrators belonging to Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) shouted slogans against the Taliban regime and demanded democracy in the country. They termed fighting between the warring factions of Afghanistan is no more Jihad (holy war). -- AFP photo



Friends and schoolmates of Elian Gonzalez (L-R) Ruben Ramon Linares, Magela Diaz, Marien Rodriguez and Hanser Munoz arrive at Dulles International Airport Thursday from Cuba. The schoolmates and their parents are visiting Elian to help him readjust to his Cuban roots. -- AFP photo

US, Vietnam take modest steps toward rapprochement

WASHINGTON, Apr 28 : Letting bygones be bygones, the United States and Vietnam have taken modest steps toward a rapprochement a quarter century after the chaotic US departure from Saigon, reports AFP.

US Defence Secretary William Cohen helped put to rest old ghosts last month with a visit to a rice paddy outside Hanoi where US soldiers and Vietnamese peasants are digging for remains of a US pilot shot down in 1967.

Cohen's first -- the pilot to Vietnam by a US defense secretary since 1971 -- was the most dramatic symbol yet of both sides' willingness to put the war behind them.

But it's still unclear where the former enemies go from here.

Five years after Washington and Hanoi normalized relations, Vietnam still belongs more to a haunted past than to the computer-fast future of global trade and foreign investment embraced by its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Monumental busts of Ho Chi Minh, the famed revolutionary leader who ended French colonial rule, look over the shoulders of the country's Communist Party leaders as they struggle uncertainly with how to engage the outside world.

Last July, Vietnam appeared to take a major step by signing a trade agreement with Washington that would open its markets to outside competition in return for greater access to the US market for its exports.

But when Cohen visited Hanoi the trade agreement still had not been ratified by Vietnam's national assembly.

The raising questions about the country's commitment to economic reform at a time of waning investor confidence.

Guatemala orders to lower bus fares after 4 killed in protest

GUATEMALA CITY, Apr 28 : Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo urged local transport authorities to drop a bus fare hike that provoked protests in which four people died, warning he would intervene today if they did not act, reports AFP.

Four people, including a press photographer, were killed and 12 injured Thursday in protests here against an increase in bus fares, Health Minister Mario Bolanos said.

Portillo, who took office only three months ago, called it a "sad day in Guatemalan history, like others we have already had."

Tigers claim further gains UN pulls out demining team from Jaffna

COLOMBO, Apr 28 : Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas today claimed to have captured another vital position from government forces in the northern peninsula of Jaffna following intense fighting, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they took Puthukadu junction from the military and claimed to have inflicted heavy casualties on government forces.

The LTTE's voice of Tigers radio said they were now more than 12 km north of the strategic army garrison of Elephant Pass which they took on Saturday.

The LTTE has been stepping up pressure in the Jaffna peninsula since Saturday's dramatic fall of the strategic Elephant Pass base at the entrance to the northern Jaffna peninsula, saying it could not operate due to intensified fighting there, a UN official said today.

"We have decided to withdraw the mine clearing team as it cannot operate in a combat zone," Mohan Samaranyake, the UN Information Officer in Colombo, told Reuters by phone.

He said up to 10 people of the mine clearing team were being withdrawn.

Jaffna is under threat from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) following the fall of the key Elephant Pass military complex last week.

Samaranyake said various UN agencies, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, had 65 people based in Jaffna, but added he was not sure whether or not they too would be withdrawn.

2 die in shoot-out in Germany

A man and a woman died in a shoot-out in a hairdressing salon in this Ruhr Valley steel town Friday morning, police said, reports AFP.

Another man was seriously wounded in the incident, whose circumstances were unclear.

Police found two guns at the scene.

Quake rocks Taiwan

An earthquake measuring 4.5 on the Richter scale jolted northeastern Taiwan Friday but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, seismologists said, reports AFP.

The quake hit at 00:33 p.m. (10:33 BST), with the epicenter 26.8 km east of Yilan city. The tremor originated 8.6 kilometers below the earth's surface. Minor tremors and aftershocks have been a daily occurrence in Taiwan since a devastating quake last September 21 which left 2,400 people dead, 11,000 injured and more than 100,000 homeless.

Japan's PM leaves for G-8 tour

Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori left Tokyo yesterday for a hectic nine-day tour to meet the leaders of all of Japan's Group of Eight (G8) partners, an official said, reports AFP.

Mori departed on a government Boeing 747 from Haneda airport, south of Tokyo, the airport official said. His whistle-stop tour of the G8 partners -- Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United States -- is in preparation for the July 21-23 G8 summit in the southern Japanese island of Okinawa.

Iran to free 480 Iraqi POWs

Iran will soon repatriate about 480 Iraqi prisoners from the 1980-88 war between the two neighbors, Iranian state television reported on Thursday, Reuters reports from Tehran.

It quoted a spokesman for Iran's commission on prisoners of war as saying the Iraqi POWs would be released in the next few days under an agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The POWs will be turned over to ICRC and Iraqi officials at a border checkpoint in "a humanitarian move," the spokesman said.

Quake shakes NZ North Island

A magnitude 5.5 earthquake rumbled beneath New Zealand's North Island, shaking houses in towns including the capital of Wellington, seismologists said, reports AFP.

There were no reports of injuries or damage, AP reports from Wellington.

Putin to visit India in Oct, sign 'strategic partnership' pact

NEW DELHI, Apr 28 : Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit India in early October and sign a "strategic partnership" pact between the long-time allies, Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra said today, reports AFP.

Addressing a joint press conference with his visiting Russian counterpart Sergei Ivanov, Mishra said Putin's visit would take place within the first 10 days of October.

"We have strategic dialogues with other countries. This will be a partnership," Mishra said of the proposed pact.

Ivanov said Moscow attached great significance to Putin's visit and the signature of such an important document which should be filled with concrete substance.

Earlier today, the two sides signed an agreement formalising cooperation between their respective national security councils.

Ivanov described the agreement as "an important step towards strengthening the relationship not only between the security council and the government, but even the people of our two countries."

Protests outside Chile court as Pinochet hearing continues

SANTIAGO, Apr 28 : Hundreds of supporters and detractors of Augusto Pinochet gathered again outside a courthouse here as a hearing on whether the former dictator should lose his parliamentary immunity entered its second day Thursday, reports AFP.

Following a bomb warning, police cleared a restaurant close to the court before Thursday's session -- which began at 3:15 p.m. (1:15 BST) and was scheduled to have four journalists, chosen by a draw, allowed into the courtroom to report.

Normally soon returned to the restaurant when the suspicious object turned out to be a bag of rubbish.

On Wednesday opposing groups had to be separated by police after hurling rocks at each other. And eight people were arrested and three students injured when two cars plowed into a group of anti-Pinochet protesters standing outside the court building before Wednesday's hearing began.

The court is considering a request from Judge Juan Guzman Tapia that Pinochet's immunity be lifted so that the former dictator can face trial for the 92 criminal cases filed against him, stemming from alleged human rights abuses during his 1973-1990 tenure.

Iran judiciary shuts last 2 reformist papers

TEHRAN, Apr 28 : Iran's headline judiciary shut down the last two major national newspapers from the reformist camp on Thursday, bringing to 16 the number of publications banned this week, reports Reuters.

The two newspapers, including a leading daily published by a brother of President Mohammad Khatami, were the last hit in a wave of closures that began on Sunday.

Two separate statements made available... by the justice department of Tehran said the two dailies had been informed to stop publication due to violation of the press law, the official IRNA news agency said.

31 of a wedding party killed in India bus plunge

NEW DELHI, Apr 28 : At least 31 people died when a bus carrying a wedding party plunged into a gorge in the Himalayan foothills of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, a government official said today.

Pratul Pant, an official in the district commissioner's office in Uttar Pradesh's Almora region, told AFP by telephone that the bus was carrying more than 60 wedding guests when it fell into a 250-foot (75-metre) gorge.

The accident happened on Thursday evening at a place where the roads turns sharply, he said. "We have recovered 31 bodies but the toll is expected to rise."

India, China hold talks on border dispute

NEW DELHI, Apr 28 : Senior Chinese and Indian Foreign Ministry officials began two days of talks here today, focusing on a long-running border dispute and President K.R. Narayanan's upcoming visit to China, reports AFP.

The talks came amid an upturn in Sino-Indian relations, which went into a tailspin after Indian officials cited a perceived "China threat" as part justification for carrying out nuclear tests in May, 1998.

The Chinese side at what marked the 12th meeting of the Sino-Indian Joint Working Group (JWG) -- set up in 1988 to seek a peaceful resolution to boundary disputes -- was led by Vice Foreign Minister Yang Wenchang.

The Indian team was headed by Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh.

Narayanan is due to go to Beijing in May to mark the 50 years of diplomatic relations. The dates of the visit have yet to be finalized.

Several hundred Tibetan exiles marched through the streets of New Delhi to protest against the border talks, arguing that the Sino-Indian frontier was historically an Indo-Tibetan frontier.

"It is absolutely apparent... that China has no boundary with India," the Tibetan Freedom Movement said in an open letter to Chinese President Jiang Zemin.



Indian Minister for External Affairs Jaswant Singh (L) greets Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Yang Wenchang (C) following a session of the 12th meeting of the Sino-Indian Joint Working Group (JWG) yesterday. The talks are focusing on a long-running border dispute and Indian President K.R. Narayanan's upcoming visit to China. -- AFP photo