

Arafat, Barak to continue talks

Opposition accuses Barak of making dangerous concessions for peace

JERUSALEM, July 20 : A senior Palestinian official said today the last-minute rescue of the Camp David peace summit was a small sign of hope, but that it was not likely to be enough to persuade Israel to change its positions.

"It means that they are still engaged, which says that it is not entirely hopeless, despite the gaps between both sides," Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian spokeswoman for the Camp David summit told AFP.

Ashrawi, however, accused Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak of behaving like an occupier in his negotiations with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, handing out dictates rather than making compromises.

US President Bill Clinton announced Thursday that Arafat and Barak had decided to pursue their negotiations during his absence in Japan after the White House earlier declared the summit a failure.

Clinton is due to return from

the G-8 summit in Japan to the United States on Sunday, but it was not immediately clear when he would go back to Camp David.

While Ashrawi said the extra time was a sign of Clinton's commitment, she said that the fundamental unwillingness of the Israeli side to make concessions would probably forestall any final peace deal.

"The most that Clinton can hope for is to prevent a breakdown and perhaps to signal a continuation through maybe a framework or principles agreement," she said.

Israel and the Palestinians face a self-imposed September 13 deadline for a final peace deal on the most critical issues in their conflict, including control over Jerusalem, the fate of millions of Palestinian refugees and the borders of a future Palestinian state.

Both sides fear violence could erupt if the Palestinians carry out a pledge to declare independence come September without an

agreement. Ashrawi said Jerusalem was one of the main sticking points, adding that Arafat has been coordinating with Arab and Islamic leaders to make sure that any possible agreement on the Holy City meets their needs.

"This is crucial because the issue of Jerusalem is important to the Arabs, Muslims and Christians throughout the world. Israel cannot continue to maintain exclusive control and sovereignty. It is not a Jewish city, obviously, it is a city for three religions," she said.

Israel claims sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem, including the eastern sector it captured in 1967, while the Palestinians want it as the capital of a future state.

Meanwhile, Israel's right-wing opposition accused Prime Minister Ehud Barak today of making dangerous concessions at Camp David, where negotiations to end half a century of conflict are to continue after the United States earlier declared the summit a

failure. Ariel Sharon, the hawkish leader of the main opposition party Likud, said it appeared Barak was being outmanoeuvred by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at the US-brokered talks, which kicked off on July 11.

"Arafat is better than the members of Israeli delegation led by Ehud Barak which hasn't stopped making painful concessions at the summit and is conducting the talks amateurishly," Sharon told Israeli public radio.

US President Bill Clinton, who is heading to Japan for a summit of leading industrialised nations, said Israel and the Palestinians had agreed to pursue peace talks after the White House earlier declared the summit was dead, but cautioned that there were no guarantees of a positive result.

The main stumbling block is understood to be Jerusalem, the Holy City coveted by both sides as their capital and the most emotive issue at the centre of the conflict.



In this photo released Wednesday by the White House, US President Bill Clinton (C) talks with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (L) and Sa'eb Erekat (R), Palestinian Authority Minister of Local Government at the presidential retreat Camp David near Thurmont, MD. The Israelis and the Palestinians had decided to pursue the Middle East peace talks during his absence, saving the summit from failure shortly after it had been pronounced dead.--AFP photo

13 militants killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, July 20: Thirteen militants, including five foreign mercenaries, and three security men were among 17 people killed in separate incidents in Jammu and Kashmir where security forces nabbed six militants since Tuesday evening, reports PTI.

Six militants, four of them foreign mercenaries, were killed in a fierce gunbattle with army troops in Poonch district's Manjakote area Wednesday afternoon, official sources said.

Mandela continues effort to broker Burundi peace

ARUSHA, Tanzania, July 20 : Former South African president Nelson Mandela began a second day mediating talks here today in a bid to end Burundi's seven-year civil war that has already claimed 200,000 lives, reports AFP. Mandela claimed late Wednesday that only two issues had to be resolved before a peace deal could be signed August 28 as planned, the independent Hirondelle news agency reported.

Two key associates of Sharif's wife detained

LAHORE, Pakistan, July 20 : Pakistani police have arrested two key associates of ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's wife, Kulsoom Nawaz, amid fears they will be charged with sedition, party officials said today, reports AFP.

Former minister Tehmina Daultana and a senior leader of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML), Javed Hashmi, were taken into custody late Wednesday.

"I have not been served with any charges so I don't know why I've been arrested," Tehmina told AFP from a police station lockdown.

They were taken into custody shortly after being released from detention following a major crackdown on the party earlier this month.

PML sources said police were planning to revive a treason case registered against them for making "provocative speeches" against the military at a national day function on March 23.

The punishment for sedition is life imprisonment. However police have not yet specified the reason for their arrests.

"Police appear very confused. They don't know what to do or how to do it. My lawyers stood outside the police station but they were denied access to me," Tehmina said.

Tehmina and Hashmi were also in the forefront of a cross-country motorised rally Kulsoom had planned on July 8 which was aborted by police in a crackdown on PML supporters.

Prominent PML figure Asad Ashraf said the arrests could be part of a new crackdown on Kulsoom loyalists in a bid to isolate her while the party struggles with internal divisions.

"It could also be an attempt to ensure that the judgement in a corruption case against Sharif is announced peacefully on Saturday," he said.

"These two leaders were the main architects of activism against the military."

Sharif was toppled in a coup in October and jailed for life for terrorism and hijacking in April. He is also on trial for corruption, but still commands the leadership of the former ruling party.



Current Miss Universe Lara Dutta gestures during a press conference in New Delhi yesterday. Dutta, who was crowned Miss Universe in May this year said she would do her utmost to help the nation's poor.--AFP photo

Fiji faces martial law again

Coup plotters discussing make-up of new govt with president

SUVA, July 20 : Fiji's military were on the verge of sacking another president and re-imposing martial law in a bid to fill a worsening political vacuum in the Pacific nation, political sources said today.

The action is likely because newly-named President Josefa Iloilo is insisting representatives of coup leader George Speight have a more prominent role in an interim government, the sources told AFP.

Their warning came as Speight supporters held talks with the president on the make-up of a new administration that is supposed to guide Fiji back to democracy.

The country's elected government, headed by Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian premier, was deposed on May 19 when Speight staged a coup in the name of indigenous Fijians' rights.

An interim administration headed by a military-backed prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, and including only a handful of

Speight allies had been due to take office on Wednesday.

But the swearing-in ceremony was cancelled at the last minute after Iloilo failed to turn up. The rebels had warned of fresh civil unrest if the government was appointed.

In an unusual move on Thursday, the Official Secretary to Government House, Joe Brown, met Police Commissioner Isikida Savua at the Suva Central Police Station. Representatives of the Speight camp were also present.

Local radio said the meeting was about national security matters but no comment was made by any participants.

Tension was still strong in the country with fears that any break-down between Speight and the authorities, who have only a weak hold on power, will lead again to a law and order crisis.

The sole hydro power station remained in rebel hands and the northern town of Labasa appeared to be suffering continued anarchy as rebels from a nearby army base terrorise

streets.

Speight, accompanied by special forces officer Ilisoni Ligairi, seized Parliament on May 19, taking Chaudhry and his government hostage.

The military declared martial law ten days later after rioting in Suva by supporters of the rebels. President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was deposed and an interim administration headed by Qarase appointed, despite opposition from Speight.

Political sources told AFP Thursday that Iloilo was willing to give Speight greater say in the government line up, but Qarase was strongly opposed to it.

Sources told AFP that one of the members of Qarase's line-up earlier Thursday visited Mara, who remains enormously influential here.

The member carried a message saying that if Iloilo gives in to Speight, the Qarase cabinet would ask the military to re-impose martial law.

Mara backed this course of action, the sources said.

Speight again Thursday vented his fury that Qarase was still in office along with the rest of the military-appointed interim cabinet.

He noted that the accord he signed with the FMF stated that the ministers were deemed to have resigned once executive authority was transferred from the military to Iloilo.

Meanwhile, Fiji's nationalist rebels were Thursday holding talks with the South Pacific nation's president on the make-up of a new government, radio services here reported.

Coup plotters George Speight and Ilisoni Ligairi seized parliament on May 19 and held the government of elected prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry hostage until last week in the name of ethnic Fijians.

New President Josefa Iloilo Tuesday named caretaker Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase as the new interim prime minister but when Qarase named a new cabinet, Speight's group threatened civil war.

BRIEFLY

Factory fire claims 12 in Egypt:

At least 12 people died and many others were feared dead, including the civil defense chief and a group of children, after a clothing factory caught fire and collapsed in Egypt's Mediterranean city of Alexandria, police said Thursday, AFP reports from Alexandria.

The police said the children and Alexandria's Civil Defense Director General Mohammed Raghi were feared to have died when the building caved in on them after the fire had been extinguished Wednesday evening.

Fresh fighting kills 12 in Lanka:

Tamil Tiger rebels blasted a school bus in northern Sri Lanka Thursday as government troops claimed they had killed another 12 Tiger guerrillas in fresh fighting, AFP reports from Colombo. Two armed men from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ordered students out before exploding grenades in the state-owned bus in the northern district of Vavuniya, officials said. They said there were no casualties and the attackers escaped before troops could arrive at the scene.

5 die in Caucasus mudslide:

A mudslide that split in two the city of Tyrynauz in the Caucasus region of Kabardino-Balkaria killed five persons and seriously injured two, Russian media said Thursday, AFP reports from Moscow. The slide, which began moving Wednesday afternoon, reached a depth of one metre (3.3 feet), hitting a nine-storey building and several five-storey houses, private television channel NTV reported. Some 450 persons were evacuated but 2,500 remained, waiting to be air-lifted to safety.

Maoists in Nepal kill cop:

The underground Nepal Communist Party-Maoist (NCP-M) have claimed the life of another policeman, police said Thursday, AFP reports from Kathmandu. The Maoists shot dead Sub-Inspector Dil Bahadur G.C. Wednesday in the Lamjung district, 235 km north-west of Kathmandu, a police source said.

3 troops killed in Mindanao:

Three soldiers were killed and four critically wounded in attacks by Muslim separatist guerrillas in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, the military said Thursday, AFP reports from Cotabato.

The army's 73rd infantry battalion came under mortar fire late Wednesday from at least 600 members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), sparking five-hours of heavy fighting in the town of Datu Udin Sinsuat.

Putin heads for G8 summit after Korea visit

SEOUL, July 20 : Russian President Vladimir Putin left North Korea today after a historic two-day visit marked by a conditional offer from the Stalinist state to halt its missile development programme, reports AFP.

Putin rounded off his visit -- the first ever by a Russian leader to North Korea -- by laying a wreath at a war memorial in Pyongyang.

He then left for a stopover in Blagoveshchensk in far eastern Russia before heading to Okinawa for this weekend's G8 Summit.

Cheering crowds lined the route as Putin was ferried to Pyongyang's airport accompanied by North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

Putin's trip was marked by an announcement Wednesday that North Korea had agreed to freeze

its missile program in exchange for access to space rocket technology.

"North Korea on the whole is ready to use exclusively other nations' rocket technologies, if it receives rocket boosters for peaceful space exploration," Putin told the Interfax news agency.

Putin stressed that other nations, besides Russia, would be responsible for making sure North Korea received the boosters.

"We think that Russia's efforts in this alone are not enough," he said.

Russia's attempt to coax a commitment from North Korea over its weapons program has been viewed as a key part of its campaign to mobilise international opposition to the United States' missile shield defence system.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with the leader of Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Jong Il during the official meeting in Pyongyang Wednesday.--AFP photo

Missing crew from sunken ship rescued

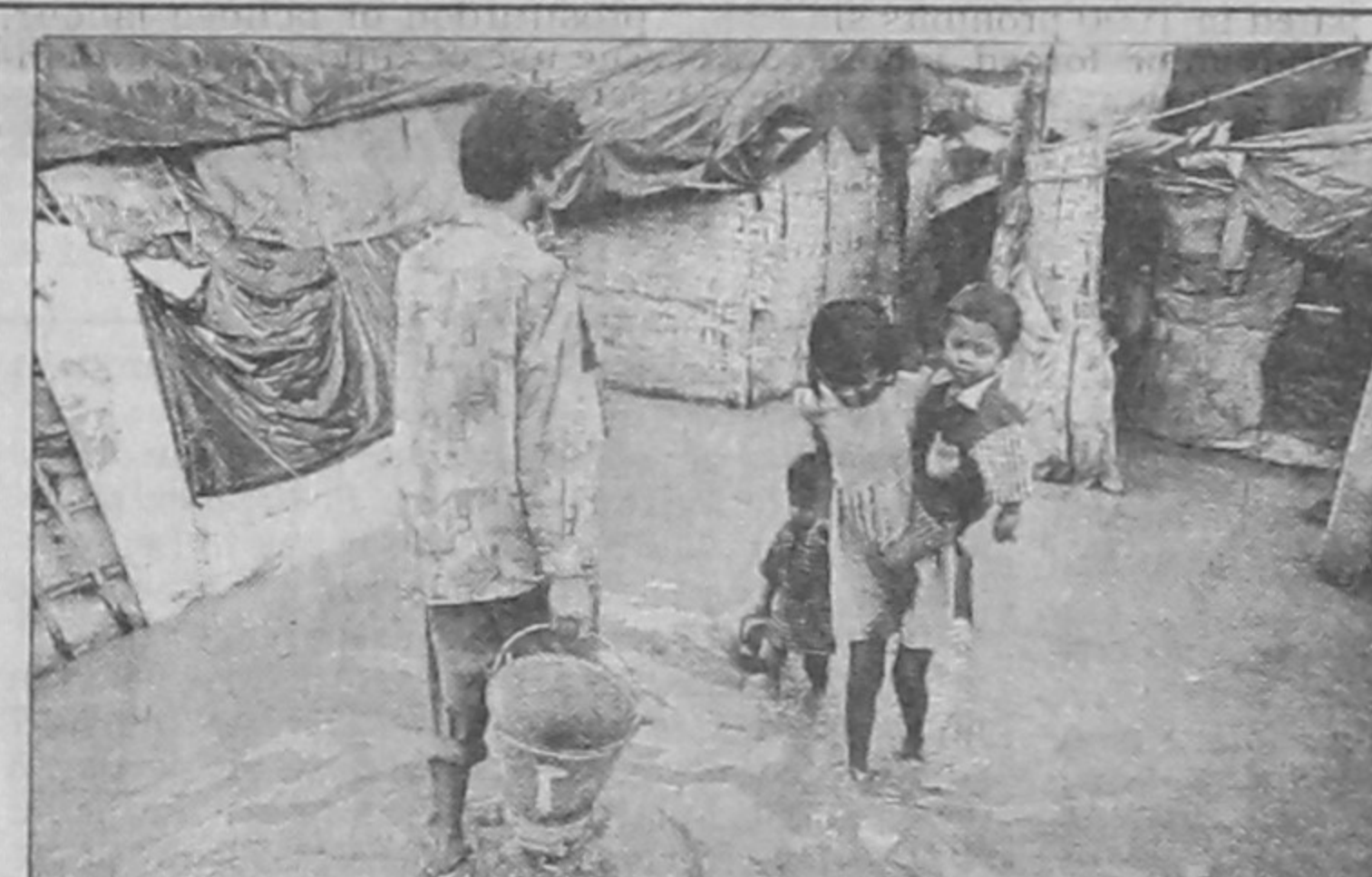
CALCUTTA, India, July 20 : All 21 crew members of a cargo vessel that struck a sandbank and sank off the eastern Indian port of Haldia have been rescued, port officials said today, reports AFP.

The Panamanian-registered M.V. Prime Value hit the sandbank Wednesday morning, some 15 nautical miles off Haldia port, forcing the 21 crew members -- most of them Filipinos -- to abandon the ship in life rafts.

US legislators lash out at Clinton's China policy

WASHINGTON, July 20 : Lawmakers and analysts tore into President Bill Clinton's key policy engaging Chinese leaders on Wednesday, calling for an unflinching response to China's emergence as an Asian military power, reports AFP.

In the latest of a series of hearings on the implications of China's growing might, members of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee expressed concern over Beijing's capacity to challenge Washington's strategy in the region.



Residents of Pusta slum on the banks of the River Yamuna wade through water yesterday in New Delhi after the river overflowed its banks to submerge many low-lying areas.--AFP photo

Russia, US set to lock horns over missile shield

NAGO, Japan, July 20 : Russian President Vladimir Putin looks set to lock horns with US President Bill Clinton over a US scheme for a ballistic missile shield at a Group of Eight summit here, reports AFP.

In a pre-summit Asian tour, Putin was backing from Chinese President Jiang Zemin and North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-Il against the national missile defence (NMD) scheme.

Barely two weeks ago, the United States admitted an inter-ceptor rocket had failed to shoot

down an incoming dummy warhead during a 100-million-dollar test of its prototype NMD system.

The botched test was an acute embarrassment to the Pentagon and Clinton, who is due to take a decision on whether to deploy the 60-billion-dollar system by the year's end.

The United States was already under pressure to defend the NMD from Russia and its allies at a G8 foreign ministers last week in the southern Japanese city of Miyazaki.

Prolonged cold snap kills 76 in South America

MONTEVIDEO, July 20 : The cold weather which has gripped the southern part of South America for the last two weeks has killed 76 people, according to figures from the various national authorities Wednesday, reports AFP.

Most of the deaths were due to hypothermia or respiratory infections, with the elderly and the very young most vulnerable. Others died from poor heaters.

Argentina has been worst hit, with 42 cold-related deaths, eight of them on Wednesday, with wind chill factors below freezing reported in almost every province of the country and no let-up in sight.

Many of deaths in Argentina were among the elderly. The figure also included at least two cases of carbon monoxide poisoning due to a malfunctioning heating system.

Brazil has blamed 13 deaths on the recent cold, mainly among people living in the streets and some peasant farmers. Authorities there are particularly concerned about the almost 9,000 people who live on the streets of Sao Paulo.

Seven people have died in Uruguay, including a two-month-old baby who died early Wednesday. Paraguay has reported eight cold-related deaths and Bolivia six.

The Brazilian, Argentine and Paraguayan meteorological agencies all predict continued low temperatures this week.

Heatwave kills 12 in Texas alone

HOUSTON, Texas, July 20 : Although summer in the United States is not a month old, record temperatures have already gripped the southwestern United States, killing 12 in Texas alone, reports AFP.

Temperatures have hit the 100-degree mark (38 Celsius) across the state for six straight days, where health officials reported at least four heat-related deaths and are investigating others as possibly heat-related.

But while the weather is scorching, Carolyn Lebert of the National Weather Service said the temperatures were not abnormal high.

"It's not all that unusual to have hot weather like this in July in Texas," Lebert said. "I don't know that people get used to it, but I think maybe people forget that it was this hot last summer."

Last year, the heat killed a total of 41 people in Texas, according to state statistics.

Other southern states are also being blasted with soaring temperatures.

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But Putin appeared to be turn-

ing up the heat ahead of the three-day G8 summit starting Friday in Naha, a beachside city on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa.

On Tuesday he issued a joint statement with Jiang specifically aimed at the system.

"Russia and China appeal to the international community to pay great attention to those countries who are trying to develop by force an anti-missile defence system which could upset the world's strategic balance," it said.

On Wednesday, the Russian leader and Kim Jong-Il also signed a memorandum opposing any changes to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, ITAR-TASS said.

And he packed further ammunition by winning an offer from Pyongyang to abandon missile development in return for rocket technology to help a supposed space program.

Washington, which cites the threat of a ballistic missile attack from states like North Korea as a reason for the NMD, reacted coolly to Putin's announcement.

Jakarta under pressure to end Muslim-Christian violence

JAKARTA, July 20 : Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid faced international and domestic pressure Wednesday to end the bloody fighting between Muslims and Christians in the Maluku Islands, which has raised the prospect of foreign peacekeepers, reports AFP.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in New York said he spoke with Wahid and urged him to take "all necessary measures" to stop the unrest, which has claimed more than 4,000 lives in the past 18 months.

"He did assure me that his government is doing its best and will intensify their efforts to bring the situation under control and we have decided to stay in touch," Annan told reporters.

A fresh wave of violence in the Maluku archipelago in the past month and the documented involvement of Indonesian army troops in the fighting has led to rising calls for the deployment of UN peacekeepers.

Both Christians and Muslims have accused security forces of taking sides in the long-running

conflict, which has also created half a million refugees.

Wahid has repeatedly indicated the country will not seek foreign military assistance to help restore security in the islands.

But Indonesia's police chief warned the pressure for peacekeepers would be irresistible unless Jakarta could stop the bloodshed.

"We object to the presence of any foreign peacekeeping force," police General Rusdiharjo said in Jakarta before a cabinet meeting.

"Consequently, we have to prove that we are capable of solving the Maluku problems immediately. Otherwise it will be hard to resist (foreign intervention)," he said.

There were no reports of clashes in islands Wednesday, but mobs burned houses in the Urimenseng area of Ambon left vacant by residents who had fled the violence, an Indonesian Red Cross volunteer said.

Local military and police vowed Wednesday to punish troops who were taking part in the violence instead of trying to control it.

Drought affects 60 m people in central, southern Asia: WFP

UNITED NATIONS, July 20 : More than 60 million people have been affected by the ongoing drought in Central and Southern Asia, particularly in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, India and Iran, the director of the UN's World Food Program (WFP) said Wednesday, reports AFP.

WFP director Catherine Bertini told a press conference that six UN humanitarian agencies have formed a "Drought Task Force" to coordinate their efforts in the region.

"Unfortunately, this is a year of too many people being affected by severe drought," she declared, stressing that there are more people affected in Asia than in the Horn of Africa, where 13 million people have been hit by drought conditions.

For Afghanistan, the worst-hit country, Bertini reiterated the figures given by the WFP Tuesday, of between three and four million people especially in danger due to food shortages caused by drought.

The WFP also said Tuesday

that a total of some 12 million Afghans were affected by the food shortages, noting that the crisis there has been greatly aggravated by the civil war which has lasted for more than 20 years.

In some parts of Afghanistan the harvest had failed completely and in other areas up to 35 per cent of the livestock has died, the UN has said.

The WFP Tuesday estimated the shortfall in cereals in Afghanistan this year to be as high as 2.3 million tonnes, more than double that of the previous year.

It said the "devastating conditions faced by many households" could force many families to "move as a matter of survival," possibly to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.

In a statement Wednesday, the agencies in the task force -- the Food and Agriculture Organization, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, WFP, and the World

Health Organization -- appealed to donors "to respond urgently and generously" to a call for contributions to a 67-million-dollar relief fund.

In Tajikistan, the cereal harvests will be 30 percent lower than they were last year, making the country the second most drought-stricken after Afghanistan, according to the agencies.

In Pakistan, some two million people have been affected by one of the worst droughts in its history.

In India, close to 50 million people have been affected, according to the Indian government. The authorities there have taken emergency measures, but have not appealed to the international community for assistance, the agencies said.

The drought has affected 18 of the 28 provinces in Iran, where the government has estimated that 12 million people, in both rural and urban areas, are suffering drinking water shortages.