

International

Millions marooned in West Bengal

CALCUTTA, India, Sept 22: The death toll from flooding in India's West Bengal state rose to 125 today, as army helicopters dropped food parcels to millions of marooned villagers, reports

AFP.

The flood waters actually receded slightly Friday, allowing Satya Ranjan Mahato, relief rescue workers to recover more consisting of molasses, puffed bodies and adjust the death toll and patted rice and plastic sheet over the past five days from 64ing was being sent to the eight



Villagers run for a safer place through a flooded highway as the water level went up at Palashi, some 150 Km north of Calcutta on Wednesday. Forty-two people have died and over one million have been made homeless in West Bengal by sudden floods after 72 hours of continuous downpours. — AFP photo

Flood death toll now 125

affected districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Midnapore, Nadia, Murshidabad, North Dinajpur, Bankura and Howrah. Sixty-nine people have died in Murshidabad alone, and 32 in Birbhum.

More than six million people have been affected by the flooding, and army helicopters continued air drops Friday to those cut off by the flood waters.

The situation had looked critical on Thursday after the sluice gates of at least three major rivers — the Damodar, Mayurakshi and Ajoy — had to be opened up to ease the pressure on reservoir dams.

The state government has asked the army for a second company of soldiers to help tackle the situation.

Army boats and helicopters have doubled their efforts at rescue and relief operations, but more trained manpower is required, State Deputy Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya said.

On Thursday, state Chief Minister Jyoti Basu had admitted that the government was experiencing difficulty in coping with

the crisis.

"The (flood) situation is very grim, and only the army can help us. We have no dearth of funds and material, but rescuing the marooned people is the prime concern now, and only the army can help in this matter," Basu said.

Official sources said the railway authorities were struggling to deal with tens of thousands of homeless people who had taken shelter on railway platforms and even inside trains.

"At least 10 trains stationed in the car sheds of various stations in Burdwan district have been occupied by villagers. The trains have turned into makeshift camps," said one local official who declined to be identified.

"People are cooking and sleeping inside the trains with their cattle and livestock," the official said.

Some 500,000 people have been lodged in official relief camps.

Basu has appealed to people to restrict spending on an upcoming religious festival and contribute to the flood relief fund instead.

Milosevic to stay in office until July 2001: PM Campaigning for polls ends

PODGORICA, Yugoslavia, Sept 22: Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic will remain in office until his mandate expires in July 2001, regardless of the outcome of Sunday's vote, Prime Minister Momir Bulatovic said in an interview broadcast today, reports AFP.

"No matter what the electoral results are, the Yugoslav president has a mandate until July next year," Bulatovic told the private Montenegrin television station Elmag.

Milosevic was appointed Yugoslav president for a four-year mandate by the federal parliament in July 1997. Yugoslavs are to elect their new president for the first time through a direct vote on Sunday.

Milosevic, who is seeking his second term in office, will face four other candidates. According to opinion polls he is trailing his main rival, Vojislav Kostunica, who is standing for a coalition of opposition parties.

Meanwhile, official campaigning has ended ahead of Sunday's watershed Yugoslav elections with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic trailing in the polls, but opposition leaders expressed fears of a rigged ballot.

A pre-marked ballot bearing the name of Milosevic was shown to journalists as evidence of vote-rigging and the opposition unveiled its plans to ensure the presidential and general elections Sunday would be free and fair.

Pak police seize rockets near Islamabad airport

ISLAMABAD, Sept 22: Pakistani police today seized seven rockets and several heavy machine gun shells near Islamabad airport, days after a fruit truck bomb exploded here killing 16 people and wounding nearly 100, officials said, reports AFP.

The rockets were found in a bag placed near a bus stand on the airport road, city police chief Nasir Durrani said.

"We found this stock due to the day and night vigil" mounted in the country since the blast in Islamabad's fruit and vegetable market on Tuesday, he told AFP. He said the arms cache was meant for some "terrorist activity" the saboteurs apparently

abandoned their plan "due to the high police and security alert."

Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf on Thursday said Indian intelligence could be behind the blast that killed 16 people in Islamabad.

There are some clues which indicate the involvement of the Indian Intelligence Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in the explosion, he said.

It was part of a "vicious campaign against Pakistan," Musharraf said, on state television after visiting the wounded at a local hospital.

Senior administration official Hamid Ali Khan said "terrorist activities have increased in the country due to tensions between

the Pakistani and Indian troops at the border" in the disputed Kashmir state.

"As the winter starts it becomes difficult to capture Pakistani border posts so they have increased terrorist activities in the cities to harass the people and divert the attention of the world from the Kashmir issue," Khan added.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since 1947, two of them over Kashmir, the Himalayan state divided between the two countries and claimed by both.

The neighbours routinely accuse rival intelligence networks of carrying out cross-border sabotage and subversion.

Real IRA blamed for blasts on M16 HQs

LONDON, Sept 22: An Irish extremist splinter group known as the Real IRA is believed to be responsible for the rocket attack on the headquarters of Britain's foreign intelligence service, the British press reported today, says AFP.

Police said there were no immediate claims of responsibility for Wednesday night's attack which only caused light damage to two windows at the fortress-like M16 building in central London, on the south bank of the Thames.

Anti-terrorist police chief Alan Fry said he was keeping an open mind as to who might be responsible, but he added that "clearly we have to keep in mind the capabilities of dissident Irish groups."

Ulster Unionist Party loses seat in by-election

BELFAST, Sept 22: David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party has lost a traditionally safe seat in a by-election in South Antrim, a result which delivers a blow to the Northern Ireland peace process, reports AFP.

The Reverend William McCrea, of the Democratic Unionist Party, which opposes the Ulster peace accord, won the local election, polling 11,601 votes. His main rival, Ulster Unionist Party candidate David Burnside, garnered 10,799 votes.

Voters went to the polls Thursday in what was seen here as a litmus test of Protestant support for power-sharing with Catholics and the peace accord that underpins it.

Israel favours UN sovereignty over Jerusalem holy places

JERUSALEM, Sept 22: Israel is pushing for sovereignty over holy sites in Jerusalem which it disputes with the Palestinians to be handed over to the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the daily Haaretz reported today, says AFP.

The move was the latest effort to break the deadlock over the site known as Temple Mount to the Israelis and the Noble Sanctuary to the Palestinians and open the way to a final peace settlement between the two sides, the paper said.

The daily added that Egypt, France, the United States and United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan were among the principal backers of the scheme.

It said Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had asked French President Jacques Chirac for his support given France's current position as head of the European Union as well as a permanent member of the Security Council. The other permanent members

BRIEFLY

Lawsuit against Li Peng in US: A New York federal judge has ruled that he can hear a civil lawsuit against China's former prime minister Li Peng filed here by survivors of the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square, AFP reports from New York.

According to Judge William Pauley's ruling on September 14, a copy of which was obtained by AFP Thursday, either Li Peng in person, or lawyers representing him, should appear in court to answer to the charges at a hearing on October 13. The lawsuit was filed August 28 by four Chinese former student leaders arrested after the crackdown and by the brother of a student killed at Tiananmen Square.

9 Tibetans held in Nepal: Police arrested nine Tibetans for travelling to Nepal without valid travel documents, officials said Friday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

They were arrested in Dolakha district, east of here, on Thursday. The group, including some children, will be sent to Kathmandu to be handed over to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which processes their onward journey to Dharamsala in India.

Russian hostage drama ends

MOSCOW, Sept 22: Armed gunmen in the Russian seaside resort of Sochi released all their hostages and gave themselves up today, local police said, but a top official said the whole incident appeared to be a sham, reports AFP.

The operation is over. The terrorists gave themselves up and the hostages have been freed," said a spokesman for the regional interior ministry, who asked not to be named.

Four armed gunmen had been holding two hostages seized on Thursday, according to Russian

official. One other captive was released overnight and a fourth had managed to escape on Thursday.

The abductors first demanded the authorities hand over 30 million dollars and release all Chechens held in Russian jails. But as the crisis dragged on, they demanded only arms and a helicopter, officials said.

First Deputy Interior Minister Vladimir Kozlov said that the security forces suspected the "abductors" and "hostages" had staged the crisis.

Police swoop on cable TV operators in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Sept 22: New Delhi police look set to clash with cable television operators over fresh directives on "cleaning up" programme content which cable officials described today as totally impractical, reports AFP.

A Delhi police official said an order had been served on the city's cable operators late Thursday in line with India's amended satellite TV broadcasting laws.

"We are warning all cable operators in New Delhi, severe legal action will be taken in case they are found violating the provisions of Cable Networks Act," a senior official said.

The act bans a broad spectrum of programming from tobacco and alcohol advertising to shows that hurt religious sentiment, or are deemed "adult" in nature.

The police warning sparked protests with cable operators saying they were unable to con-

trol the content of satellite channels they carry.

"Tell me, if a channel is found beaming objectionable pictures, how can we be expected to check it," said Rakesh Dutta, General Secretary of the Cable Network Association.

The national capital of 12 million people has some 100 cable TV operators and 1,500 franchises which distribute up to 40 satellite channels through other operators across the city.

O.P. Yadav of Neha Cables said: "This means we will now have to monitor each and every channel, 24 hours a day... every second of the minute to avoid any goof-up... This is ridiculous!"

A previous law that permitted broadcasts of "adult shows" between 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. was scrapped by the latest amendment ordered by Vajpayee's administration.



British Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh listen to Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech (R), after she opened the 46th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference at London's Westminster Hall on Thursday. — AFP photo

Suu Kyi removed from rail station, put on house arrest

YANGON, Sept 22: Security forces forcibly removed Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from Yangon railway station early today and surrounded her home, blocking diplomats from visiting, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Aung San Suu Kyi had to be removed from Yangon station by security personnel because "she lashed out at a station cleaning crew before being asked to leave by station authorities," the Yangon junta said in a statement.

The Nobel laureate had arrived at Yangon station Thursday afternoon having said she wanted to take a train to northern city of Mandalay.

But when she was told there were no tickets left for the former capital, she and her party refused to leave the station, the junta said.

"They became abusive toward the station cleaning staff, and had to be escorted from the building at approximately 1:00 am Friday (00:30 BST Thursday)."

Aung San Suu Kyi "is now at home, and the government is investigating the incident," it said.

Witnesses said they saw the National League for Democracy

(NLD) leader taken back to her house by six military police cars on Friday after being prevented from boarding the train.

Nine members of the NLD including deputy leader Tin Oo went with Aung San Suu Kyi back to her house and no one had come out of her house since 1:15 a.m., witnesses said.

A tight security cordon of at least fifty police was placed around Aung San Suu Kyi's house and around NLD headquarters Friday, with military police surrounding the buildings and keeping all nearby businesses and shops shut.

Diplomats who had attempted to visit the NLD leader Friday mid-morning were turned away outside her compound and prevented from entering the house, British diplomats said.

Aung San Suu Kyi had reportedly wished to travel to the northern city of Mandalay to check reports of a crackdown on NLD offices.

While she was prevented from boarding the train, about 100 of her supporters were also herded into trucks by military police at the station and taken to an undisclosed location.

Trains had departed full but

witnesses said they suspected the passengers had boarded the trains at the far side of the station.

The United States strongly condemned the NLD leader's removal from the station.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in a statement, "the blatant, heavy-handed action is only the latest outrage committed against Aung San Suu Kyi and other party leaders by Burmese authorities."

"It is unacceptable," Albright said.

"The United States holds the Burmese government responsible for their safety and welfare and calls for the immediate restoration of their freedom of movement and access to others, including foreign diplomats."

The junta last week ended the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi following a nine-day roadside showdown but barred her from leaving the capital.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the other members of the NLD central executive committee had been placed under virtual house arrest on September 2, after they tried to attend a party meeting outside Yangon.

Interim Fiji govt unacceptable, says NZ FM

AUCKLAND, Sept 22: New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff bluntly told Fiji today that its interim government was unacceptable and should be replaced by a democratically elected one within a year, reports AFP.

Fiji's democratically elected prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry was seized by coup leader George Speight on May 19 and removed from office on May 29 when the Fiji Military Forces (FMF) declared martial law and abrogated the 1997 multi-racial constitution.

The FMF has since appointed an interim government led by an unelected prime minister, Laisenia Gqase.

11 electrocuted as power cable falls on bus in Bihar

PATNA, India, Sept 22: At least 11 passengers were killed Friday when a power cable fell on their bus in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, officials said, reports AFP.

An unspecified number of others were injured in the bizarre accident some 60 km from the state capital of Patna, regional administrator Gautam Goswami said.

Police put the number of those killed at 11 but Goswami said 16 people died when the 11,000-volt cable snapped and came into contact with the bus as it was passing through a marketplace in Hajipur town.

Pakistan, India to swap hundreds of detained fishermen soon

KARACHI, Sept 22: Pakistan and India are expected to repatriate soon hundreds of fishermen languishing in rival jails for the past several years, a spokesman for the Pakistan Fishermen's Cooperative Society said today, reports AFP.

The two countries have allowed consular access to the detained and "we are on standby as asked by our government," Haji Ghazanfar Ali Boota said.

Boota told AFP that 137 Pakistani fishermen were likely to be released in return of 112 Indian fishermen.

Indian foreign ministry spokesman Raminder Singh Jassal on Thursday said efforts were being made to repatriate Indian fishermen from Pakistan.

Some 17 Indian boats and 112 fishermen were detained in Pakistan between October 1999 and

February 2000, he said, adding Islamabad had provided consular access to 84 Indian fishermen.

Boota said most of the Indians were in a Karachi prison.

Indians have already confirmed the presence of 49 Pakistani fishermen and four fishing boats and provided consular access to them, he said.

Last week India released three children of Pakistani fishermen on humanitarian grounds after keeping them in custody for six months.

Boota said there are total 294 Pakistani fishermen on the list of Pakistan Fishermen's Cooperative society, many of them had been in Indian jails since 1994 but Indians had confirmed the presence of 157.

Pakistan and India released some 400 fishermen in 1997.

Cohen urges N Korea to ease military tension

TOKYO, Sept 22: Stalinist North Korea must soon start taking steps to ease military tension, US Defence Secretary William Cohen said today, warning the flow of aid from the South cannot be a "one-way street," reports AFP.

Expressing the strongest US reservations yet about the budding North-South détente, Cohen said Pyongyang had intensified military training and had moved more troops and artillery pieces

closer to the Korean demilitarised zone.

"You cannot have a situation where all the economic aid flows into the North and they continue to build up the military and there is no reduction in tension," Cohen told Japanese lawmakers.

"But there must be at some point -- and not too far in the distance -- some element of reciprocity in terms of reducing tension," he said before leaving Tokyo for home.

Iraq urges Arabs to restore air links, sees end of ban Embargo-breaking flight leaves Paris for Baghdad

BAGHDAD, Sept 22: An official Iraqi daily urged Arab countries today to restore air links despite a decade-old embargo, as a French plane went ahead with a Paris-Baghdad flight for the first time since 1990, reports AFP.

"It is high time for all Arabs and friends of Baghdad to take a courageous stand and resume air links with Iraq," said the newspaper, Al-Iraq, under a headline of "Welcome to the arrivals in Baghdad."

Al-Iraq said a resumption of flights in and out of Iraq would "ease the suffering of Iraqis" by leading to a lifting of the UN sanctions in force since the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

A private plane carrying medical staff and a group of athletes left Paris for Baghdad on Friday after France ignored a UN request to delay the departure of what

organisers insisted was a humanitarian flight.

Its aim was to show French solidarity with the Iraqi people, "and to show that the air embargo imposed by the United States has no legal existence as such," the organisers of the mission said.

France, Russia and China insist that no UN resolution bans non-commercial passenger flights to Iraq, but Washington and London say every flight to Iraq needs authorisation.

Earlier, a private plane left Paris for Baghdad today after France ignored a UN request to delay the departure of what organisers insisted was a humanitarian flight, the first between the two cities since the international embargo imposed on Iraq in 1990.

The plane, carrying medical

staff and a group of athletes, took off from Paris' Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport at 8:35 a.m. (12:35 BST), airport sources said.

Francois Girard-Hautout, an official for the organisation behind the flight, the French Office for the Development of Industry and Culture (OFDIC), described the flight as a humanitarian mission.

OFDIC has called the mission, which was originally set to depart on September 6 with a larger group of athletes, Operation Zephyr. It was of a "strictly humanitarian" nature, it said in a statement.

Its aim was to show French solidarity to the Iraqi people, "and to show that the air embargo imposed by the United States has no legal existence as such," the statement added.



Child refugees from Jolo Island in the southern Philippines cry as they wait to disembark from a naval ship that ferried them to safety in nearby Zamboanga city yesterday along with hundreds of other islanders. At least 15,000 people have been displaced, 60 rebels killed and five soldiers wounded in seven days of military assaults against the Muslim extremist Abu Sayyaf holding a group of local and foreign hostages in Jolo. Local reports say dozens of civilians may also have been killed or wounded in the clashes. — AFP photo