

International

Relief workers struggle to reach Indian flood victims

Death toll rises to 880

CALCUTTA, Sept 27 : Relief workers struggled Wednesday to reach millions of people cut off by floods in eastern India and Bangladesh, as the death toll topped 880 and one senior official warned of a "national disaster," reports AFP.

In India's West Bengal state, where 555 bodies have been recovered in the past nine days with 201 missing presumed dead, the floodwaters continued to threaten the state capital, Calcutta, with its 10 million population.

There is waterlogging in Calcutta. Two famous temples, Dakshinawar and Kalighat were partially submerged on Tuesday," said Inspector Dipumoy Mondal.

"Our only demand is that the

at the city's main police station. "We are pumping out water from the affected areas," Mondal said.

The waters of the Hooghly River which runs through Calcutta were running dangerously high, causing the authorities to evacuate people living in low-lying areas along its banks.

Elsewhere in West Bengal, overstretched relief teams were still trying to reach millions of villagers who have been completely cut off for up to five days.

"This is a national disaster," said state Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, who reiterated a call for help from the central government in New Delhi.

"Our only demand is that the

Centre should send a team before the waters recede in the devastated areas," Basu told reporters.

Fernando Soares, a member of a Red Cross flood response team sent to West Bengal, said that while some relief supplies were getting through, many areas were still inaccessible.

For those still cut off, this is obviously a very serious situation," Soares told AFP.

They are very distressed, have lost all their possessions and are completely reliant on air drops for food and other supplies."

Military helicopters and rescue boats continued to drop relief supplies where they could, but the sheer size of the affected area has meant available manpower

has been stretched to the limit.

"The overall situation has improved but waters are receding slowly and there are forecasts for further heavy rain," said relief commissioner P.S. Ingty.

The West Bengal floods have affected more than 10 million people and damaged at least 1.5 million houses.

Reports of looting had earlier come in from all of the state's affected districts, as desperate villagers ransacked relief trucks for foodstuffs.

Eight more deaths were reported Tuesday from the eastern Indian state of Bihar, which adjoins West Bengal, taking the toll in the current flooding there to 116.

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