

International

Disease threat looms in flood-hit West Bengal

NARSINGHPUR, India, Sept 29: Outbreaks of water-borne diseases were expected to increase among the millions of people in eastern India affected by the worst flooding in 22 years, officials and relief workers said today, reports Reuters.

Conditions were dire and some five million people were still marooned even though the floods waters, which have killed an estimated 600 people, were receding, they said.

"The situation is still quite critical. It's a huge disaster," Fernando Soares, a spokesman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies told Reuters.

Vast areas remained cut off, making it difficult for volunteers to get relief supplies to victims, Soares said.

Army officials said that although water had receded from most main roads in worst hit West

Bengal state, the flooding had caused severe damage, particularly in Calcutta, northern parts of the state, as well as in neighbouring countries.

Heavy flows in the Ganges and 56 other rivers sweeping into Bangladesh from India have swamped 11 western districts of that country.

The deluge has affected 17 million people, of whom more than five million were still marooned by vast lakes of water on Thursday.

Government officials have already distributed 100,000 halogen tablets used to treat contaminated water, and medical teams have been sent to distant areas.

A military official supervising relief operations said outbreaks of water borne diseases were expected to surge.

"Usually the situation becomes a lot more critical after the water recedes and we fear that in the

coming days there could be an outbreak of water borne diseases," said Lieutenant Colonel EJ Sanchis.

The suffering will continue for a long time. It is already a very poor area and many people have lost all their belongings."

West Bengal state has appealed to the federal government in New Delhi for 9.62 billion rupees (\$209.6 million), but the amount was expected to cover less than a third of the cost of damage to buildings, infrastructure and crops.

In the worst hit district of Mursidabad, 40 metre (yard) stretches of road on both sides of bridge had been washed away, Sanchis said.

While many areas were now accessible, army boats had to travel 20 km (12 miles) to distribute food and medicines to people in some areas, such as Narsinghpur, 50 km (30 miles) northeast of Calcutta, he said.



Former South African President Nelson Mandela (R) and British Prime Minister Tony Blair walk onto the stage before Mandela addresses the delegates on the final day of the Labour Party annual conference in Brighton on Thursday. -AFP photo

China condemns US arms sales to Taiwan

BEIJING, Sept 29: China today condemned new US arms sales to Taiwan, warning that Washington would bear unspecified consequences for defying Beijing's exports.

The Chinese side urges the US to... abandon the planned arms sales to Taiwan," Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said.

"Otherwise, the US side should bear the serious consequences arising therefrom," he said in a statement read on state television and carried by the official Xinhua News Agency.

China claims Taiwan as a breakaway province to be recovered by force if necessary and hotly objects to all weapons sales to the island. The sides split amid a civil war in 1949 and have no official contact despite burgeoning trade and investment links.

Vietnam steps up evacuation efforts as flood toll rises

HANOI, Sept 29: The Vietnamese army stepped up efforts to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people hanging on in flooded areas of the Mekong Delta today as the death toll rose relentlessly even as water levels began to recede, reports AFP.

A total of 159 people, 137 of them children, have died in the floods, the worst to hit the region in nearly 40 years, provincial officials said.

And with large areas expected to remain under water for weeks to come, officials fear many more will lose their lives unless the estimated 400,000 people in stricken areas are swiftly moved to higher ground.

The Vietnamese army deployed another twenty rescue boats to speed up the evacuation effort Friday and a further twenty were expected to arrive in the region in the next few days.

Captain, officers of Greek ferry charged with manslaughter

ATHENS, Sept 29: The captain and four officers of a Greek ferry which sank this week killing at least 64 people have been charged with multiple counts of manslaughter, a prosecution source said today, reports AFP.

The Express Samena, which was carrying 511 people, sank Tuesday after hitting a rock off the island of Paros in the Aegean Sea.

A number of passengers have alleged that crew members were watching a football match on television when the ship ran aground.

Among a long list of charges, Captain Vassilis Yannakis was also charged with failing to fulfil his duty and causing a shipwreck, the prosecution source added.

Yannakis, his second-in-command Anastassios Psychopoulos, and three other officers are being held in Syros, the main island of the Cyclades archipelago.

Greek authorities vowed Thursday to severely punish those responsible for the disaster, saying there would be no attempt to cover up negligence or protect big interests.

"I will ensure that light is shed and that those responsible be punished with the utmost severity, however high-placed they may be," said the minister responsible for the merchant marine Christos Papoutsis.

"The penalties will be very severe and there will be no attempt at a cover-up," he said, adding that a thorough investigation will be carried out "even if it affects big interests."

KSA turns back Yemeni jet bound for Baghdad

Plane takes off again for Iraq

SANA, Sept 29: Saudi Arabia refused to allow a Yemeni plane headed for sanctions-hit Iraq to overfly its territory without UN authorisation today, forcing the aircraft to turn back to Sanaa, officials said, reports AFP.

"The plane returned to Sanaa 30 minutes after take-off because the Saudi authorities refused the overflight of its territory without a green light from the UN sanctions committee," a Yemeni official said.

"We are now waiting for authorisation from Saudi authorities for the plane to depart," he said, asking not to be named.

There was no immediate Saudi comment on the incident.

The Yemeni flight, with Foreign Minister Abdel Qader Bajammal on board, was to be the second flight in three days from an Arab

country, after more than 10 years of UN sanctions against Iraq since its invasion of Kuwait.

Earlier a Yemeni plane left Sanaa for Baghdad, the second flight in three days from an Arab country after more than 10 years of sanctions against Iraq, an official Yemeni source said.

Saudi Arabia earlier refused to allow the plane to overfly its territory without UN authorisation, forcing the aircraft to turn back to Sanaa, Yemeni officials said.

An airport official said the plane would make a brief stopover in Amman, apparently to avoid crossing a "no-fly" zone over southern Iraq bordering Saudi Arabia that is enforced by the United States and Britain.

The plane took off again immediately after the captain received authorisation from Saudi aviation authorities to fly over the territory of Saudi Arabia, he said.

Putin to boost defence ties during India visit

MOSCOW, Sept 29: President Vladimir Putin flies to New Delhi on Monday at the start of a three-day visit the Kremlin hopes will stop the Indian military deserting Russian defence contractors for foreign rivals, reports AFP.

Russian military equipment has provided the backbone of India's armed forces since the end of the Cold War but recently New Delhi has been looking at other markets in Europe and Israel.

Putin is therefore expected to use his summit meeting with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to offer Russian investments in India's defence industries in return for continuing arms sales.

Russian defence officials are already in New Delhi to clinch a deal for 22 MiG-29K fighters

Indian troops gun down 17 militants in Kashmir

JAMMU, India, Sept 29: Indian armed forces have gunned down 17 suspected Muslim militants in separate gunbattles in the Indian-administered zone of Kashmir, officials said here yesterday, reports AFP.

An Indian army spokesman in the state capital of Jammu said eight of them were killed in Kashmir's south yesterday. He said eight were Pakistanis who were shot after they crossed the border and entered Indian territory.

Spokesman Sanjay Khanna identified six of them as rebels belonging to the Lashkar-e-Taiba separatist group and said they were killed in an encounter in the forests of Panjara, some 150 kilometers (90 miles) northwest of Jammu.

The other two killed yesterday were militants from the dominant Hizbul Mujahideen group, Khanna said, adding that they were killed in a fierce encounter in the southern Kashmiri district of Udhampur.

"All eight were Pakistanis," he said, adding that a junior commissioned army officer also died in the fighting.

Nine other suspected Muslim militants, including a former Hizbul guerilla leader, were killed by the army in separate encounters late Wednesday night in the disputed Himalayan territory, officials said in Srinagar.



Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori (C) is offered a helping hand as he arrives at the Organisation of American States (OAS) on Thursday in Washington, DC. Fujimori met with OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria and is expected to meet with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright yesterday. -AFP photo

Ex-Canadian PM Trudeau dead

MONTREAL, Sept 29: Former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a flamboyant and charismatic political giant who led the country through some of its most tumultuous events, had died. He was 80, reports AFP.

Trudeau died Thursday of prostate cancer, said Roy Heenan, senior partner of the Montreal law firm Heenan Blaikie, where Trudeau worked.

Trudeau was hospitalised for 10 days with pneumonia at the beginning of the year and associates say he never fully regained his strength. He also was believed to suffer from Parkinson's disease.

Heenan said Trudeau's health had declined "very steadily" in his final days.

During 16 years as prime minister, briefly interrupted by a 1979 election defeat, Trudeau seemed to personify North America's dynamic political and social changes, with a sophisticated, sometimes irreverent style that fascinated and captivated his country.

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien praised Trudeau late Thursday as a force for change that continues to "shape the soul of his people."

He said Trudeau "dreamed of a society that afforded all of its citizens an equal opportunity to succeed in life."

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