

World pledges aid as hopes dim for quake survivors

NEW DELHI, Jan 28: International rescue teams began arriving in India on Sunday as the world continued to pledge help for the victims of the deadliest earthquake to hit the country in half a century, reports AFP.

Hopes dimmed for the thousands still trapped 48 hours after a massive earthquake left 15,000 feared dead. The quake, measuring up to 7.9 on the Richter scale, struck the western state of Gujarat Friday.

Fresh tremors on Sunday morning triggered panic in Gujarat's main city of Ahmedabad, where thousands had spent a second night out in the streets, too scared to return to their homes.

While the official body count from Friday's quake stood at only 2,366, senior government officials said the final figure would exceed 15,000.

Around 33,000 were said to be injured and hundreds of thousands homeless.

On Sunday, rescue teams from Turkey, Russia and Switzerland arrived in the worst-hit state

of Gujarat, with others from Britain, Italy and France expected later in the day.

Rescue workers in Japan and Taiwan, where 2,400 people were killed by a quake in September 1999, were standing by, awaiting the go-ahead.

Britain, the former colonial ruler which has a large Indian community, immediately pledged three million pounds (4.5 million dollars) in aid.

More than 48 hours after the disaster, international aid continued to flow in.

Australia Sunday pledged one million dollars (550,000 US) to assist emergency relief programs and offered the services of a disaster management expert.

Prime Minister John Howard said: "On behalf of the government and people of Australia, I extend to Prime Minister Vajpayee and the government and people of India our heartfelt sympathies."

China, with whom India has fought a war, also said it would send disaster relief materials worth five million yuan (602,000

dollars) to India and a team of seismological experts. On Saturday China had pledged an initial 500,000 dollars through the Red Cross.

Japan offered 103.5 million yen (976,000 dollars) in emergency aid including 700,000 dollars in grants-in-aid and materials worth 30 million yen.

The International Red Cross on Saturday launched an appeal for two million Swiss francs (1.2 million dollars).

Officials said the money was for clothing, blankets, medical supplies and building materials, as well as water treatment plants to provide drinking water.

As local medical teams struggled to cope amid power shortages and dwindling supplies, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said it was preparing to send two emergency hospitals to India.

The main hospital in the town of Bhuj, just 20 km from the epicentre of the quake, was destroyed in the shockwave, trapping doctors and nurses inside.

Federation official Tony Marjory Thomas told reporters: "The hospitals are standing by in Finland and Germany and will be deployed in India in 24 hours after receiving an initial assessment report from teams which are already on the ground."

Red Cross officials added they were finding it difficult to gain access because of the destruction.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said he was "deeply saddened" by the tragedy, and offered assurances that the UN would support relief efforts.

European Commission President Romano Prodi expressed the "greatest sympathy and solidarity" while EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten, on an official visit to India, said Europe was ready to provide all possible assistance.

Among the first to offer help and condolences was the leader of India's perennial arch rival, Pakistan, which offered relief supplies, including medicines and equipment.



Rescue workers carry a dead body found through debris of homes in Anjar in Bhuj district 28 January 2001 that collapsed in an earthquake that struck north western India 26 January. At least 15,000 people are feared dead as a result of the tremor, with casualties expected to rise

Plane crash kills 10 in Colorado

WASHINGTON, Jan 28: A small plane crashed near Denver, Colorado, late Saturday, killing all ten people aboard, officials with the US Federal Aviation Administration said, reports AFP.

Several students, who were players on the Oklahoma State basketball team, as well as team staff members, are believed to have been among the casualties, various US new media reported.

An FAA spokesman said early Sunday that authorities were unable to confirm the identities of the crash victims, but said the fatalities included eight passengers and two crew members -- a pilot and co-pilot.

Officials said the aircraft was a Beachcraft King Air 200 twin turbo prop. They were not able to provide information about the age of the plane.

The aircraft, en route to Stillwater, Oklahoma, went down in the town of Bevers, about 32 kilometers (20 miles) southeast of Denver in snowy weather, officials said.

According to news reports, the aircraft was one of three planes en route to a afternoon basketball game in Boulder, Colorado, against the Buffaloes, the local team there.

ME deal likely after Israeli polls

Sharon labels Taba declaration an 'election ploy'

TABA, Egypt, Jan 28: Palestinians and Israelis emerged from marathon talks here Saturday proclaiming a new will to overcome months of bloodshed and strike a permanent peace settlement after Israel's upcoming elections, reports AFP.

"We feel that today we are closer than ever to the possibility of striking a final deal between us and the Palestinians," Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami said, taking his cue from a statement issued by both sides.

He also held out the possibility of a meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat "in the middle of the week" to give the statement their stamp of approval.

But Israel's right-wing Likud opposition party immediately denounced the joint Israeli-Palestinian statement in Taba, Egypt as a political ploy 10 days before a prime ministerial election which Likud leader Ariel Sharon is poised to win.

Indeed, neither side clinched the accord they sought and the head Palestinian negotiator, Ahmed Qorei, gave a more sub-

dued assessment than Ben Ami did at their joint press conference at a luxury hotel on the Red Sea.

Barak is widely seen as needing a peace agreement to keep his job amid disillusionment over his peace policies.

However, the joint statement spoke of "substantial progress" on core issues and dispelled much of the bitterness wrought by four months of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that has cost nearly 400 lives, mostly Palestinians.

"The peace process cannot be considered dead and the way ahead is still open," Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo, who is also information minister, said earlier.

Ben Ami added that the basis for a final settlement had been laid by the progress achieved on some issues and the new spirit of trust from six days of talks.

The Taba talks were "unprecedented in their positive atmosphere and their expression of mutual willingness to meet the national, security and existential needs of each side," the statement said.

"The two sides are convinced

in a short period of time... it will be possible to bridge the differences remaining and attain a permanent settlement of peace."

But with the time constraints of the February 6 election, "it proved impossible to reach understandings on all issues despite the substantial progress that was achieved in each of the issues discussed."

Meanwhile, Israeli prime minister hopeful Ariel Sharon said the joint Israeli-Palestinian statement on their peace negotiations was nothing but an "election ploy" ahead of the February 6 ballot for prime minister.

"This declaration means nothing," Sharon declared following Saturday's joint statement by negotiators in the Egyptian resort of Taba that the two sides had never been so close to an accord, press reports said Sunday.

"Ehud Barak is endangering the state of Israel to obtain a piece of paper to help him in the election but once the people of Israel find out what is in the paper and what Barak has conceded, he won't get any more votes," Sharon was quoted as saying.

Kenya allows clinical tests of AIDS vaccine

NAIROBI, Jan 28: Clinical trials of an AIDS vaccine are due to begin in Kenya soon following approval of the tests by the country's medical authorities, an official statement released here Sunday said, reports AFP.

The trial was approved by Kenya's National Council of Science and Technology last month after being cleared by Kenyatta National Hospital's Ethics and Research Committee, according to the statement issued by the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI).

The trials were due to begin last month, but were delayed pending official approval and the resolution of a patents dispute between Kenyan and British scientists, whose developed the vaccine.

The IAVI statement said that the patents dispute had been ironed out.

"All existing and future patents covering the vaccine candidate will be owned jointly by the Medical Research Council (Oxford University), the University of Nairobi and IAVI," the statement added.

Killing of 5 Muslim clerics sparks violence in Karachi

KARACHI, Jan 28: Violence erupted in the Pakistani port city of Karachi Sunday after unidentified gunmen shot dead five Sunni Muslim clerics in a new wave of sectarian unrest, police and witnesses said, reports AFP.

Unruly mobs torched six vehicles, including two police vans and made an abortive attempt to attack a mosque of the minority Shiite sect in the eastern neighbourhood of Shah Faisal Colony, police said.

At least 12 people with bullet wounds were admitted to hospital after an exchange of gunshots between supporters of the Sunni Muslim's Swade Azam party and militants inside the Shiite mosque, hospital and police officials said.

"The situation is very tense and we have asked for the deployment of paramilitary troops," city police chief Tariq Jamil told AFP.

"We have received about a dozen gunshot cases," doctor Javed Ahmed of the main Jinnah Hospital said.

"Police fired warning shots and repeatedly used tear gas as hun-

dreds of slogan-chanting people took to the streets after the early morning slaying, witnesses said.

Witnesses said four people riding on two motorbikes blocked a van carrying students and teachers to Madrassa Jamia Farooqia, an Islamic seminary in the violence-prone city's eastern district.

The assailants, armed with automatic weapons, sprayed bullets at the vehicle when it entered a narrow lane leading to the seminary, they said.

The attackers fled on motorbikes, leaving five people dead, including a senior Sunni scholar, Allama Inayatullah.

Another scholar Maulana Saitar, who had a bullet pierced into his head, was reported in serious condition, hospital officials said.

Local administration chief Iqbal Hussain Durrani said the bodies of the slain people had been placed in the compound of their madrassa, surrounded by hundreds of residents and angry students.

"It appears to be a sect-

motivated act of terrorism," he said, adding that security had been tightened and efforts were underway to arrest the killers.

Riot police fired tear gas to disperse hundreds of students who blocked the roads by burning tyres and pelted stones on buses and trucks, a police officer said.

Witnesses said shops and markets in the area had been closed.

Police used batons and fired into the air after an exchange of gun shots between the angry mob and the people inside the Shiite mosque, Durrani said.

The head of the religious school, Maulana Salmullah, condemned the killings and advised his followers to remain peaceful.

"It is an act of terrorism. Police and the administration failed to provide security to our madrassas and scholars," Salmullah said.

Shiite political party Tehreek-e-Jafria Pakistan (TJP) denied its involvement in the attack.



Alan Garcia
Ex-Peruvian president
Garcia returns from exile

LIMA, Jan 28: Peruvian former president Alan Garcia returned to Peru from Colombia Saturday, ending more than eight years' exile to become a presidential candidate for his social-democratic party in the April election, reports AFP.

Garcia, 51, Peru's president from 1985 to 1990, arrived in Lima at 5:45 pm (4:45 BST) on a commercial flight from Bogota, accompanied by his wife, Pilar.

"I am very satisfied and emotional to set foot in my homeland, return again to my country and meet all those who are of this land," Garcia told more than 1,000 supporters who came out to greet him.

Peru's Supreme Court on January 18 dismissed charges against Garcia and lifted a warrant for his arrest, clearing the way for his return to Peru to run for another term in office.

The court acted at the request of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.

Garcia will be the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance candidate for president in elections scheduled for April 8. He has spent eight years and eight months in exile in Colombia and France.

Hinduja lobbied Blair to promote Asian deputy

LONDON, Jan 28: A political storm surrounding the granting of favours to Indian-born billionaire brothers intensified today, with press allegations dragging Prime Minister Tony Blair personally into the affair, reports AFP.

Britain's most prominent Asian MP, Keith Vaz, was made a minister shortly after tycoon Srichand Hinduja lobbied Blair to give Vaz a job, the Sunday Telegraph reported.

Vaz, 43, of Indian origin and Britain's most senior minister to come from an ethnic minority, is under growing pressure over his involvement with the Hinduja family.

Srichand Hinduja is at the centre of the controversy which led to Peter Mandelson, a key aide to Blair, resigning his ministerial post last week over claims he intervened in an application for a British passport by the businessman.

According to the Sunday Telegraph's latest allegation, Hinduja wrote to Blair in spring 1999 complaining that there were no Asian ministers in the British government.

Within months Vaz, 43 was appointed to his first ministerial post, in the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Downing Street insisted that all promotions are made on merit.



Cherie Blair, the wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, (2nd right) speaks to Auschwitz survivor Esther Brunstein (left) while her husband Tony Blair (right) speaks with another survivor Roman Halter, (third right both partially concealed) before attending the first national commemoration of "Holocaust Memorial Day" at Westminster Central Hall in London on Saturday evening.

--AFP photo

Europeans mark Holocaust Day

ROME, Jan 28: Several European nations marked Holocaust Memorial Day on Saturday, with demonstrations, speeches and ceremonies to remember the victims of Europe's darkest chapter and warn of the ever-present danger of extremism, reports AFP.

The biggest events were in Germany and Italy -- formerly the two key European allies in the World War II Axis led by Nazi Germany -- with other ceremonies in Britain and Sweden.

January 27 has been generally accepted as the date to commemorate the genocide of six million Jews during World War II, and other genocidal massacres of recent history, because it is the anniversary of the liberation in

1945 of the Auschwitz extermination camp in Poland.

European Commission President Romano Prodi, speaking on radio in his native Italy, set the tone by stating that the EU "was born so as not to forget the tragedies of the past, and so that those tragedies may not be repeated."

Wolfgang Thierse, speaker of the Bundestag, the German lower house of parliament, said the event was "not a commemoration with no follow-up, but a commitment for the future."

In Rome, the president of the Italian parliament, Luciano Violante, urged Italians to reflect on Italy's role in the Holocaust, with special reference to racial measures and repression carried

out at the initiative of the local fascist rule of Benito Mussolini.

He recalled the "shame of racial laws passed by the chamber of deputies in 1938" and the deportation of nearly 7,000 Italian Jews.

The Holocaust is an unforgivable evil. Our only duty is to never forget," he told students in Agrigento, on the southern Italian island of Sicily.

Football fans attending matches in stadiums across Italy -- favourite venues for far-right activists -- were due to hold a minute of silence to mark the event.

Germans marked the anniversary with processions across the country against the far right.

Bush may seek ban on 'partial birth'

WASHINGTON, Jan 28: US President George W. Bush, who recently cut off US funds to overseas groups that support abortion, plans to keep another promise he made during last year's campaign by seeking a ban on so-called "partial-birth" abortions, a top aide said Saturday, reports AFP.

Banning the procedure -- known as a partial-birth abortion because the foetus is partially extracted from the woman's birth canal before it is aborted -- has become one of the most bitter battles in the ongoing struggle over abortion in the United

States.

Even some supporters of legal abortion have described the procedure as legalised infanticide and want it outlawed.

"We'll be working with Congress to try to get a ban on partial-birth abortions. We want to get a ban in place and he will work to try to do that," Andrew Card told CNN.

Bush pledged last year to sign such a ban in an acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, where he was nominated as the party's presidential candidate.

Exile is Estrada's call: Arroyo

MANILA, Jan 28: Philippine prosecutors will pursue corruption charges against ousted leader Joseph Estrada, but sending him into foreign exile would be his decision, President Gloria Arroyo said on Sunday, reports AFP.

"That would be Mr. Estrada's call. It's his call," Arroyo said in a statement issued by the presidential palace.

Arroyo was commenting on calls to send the fallen leader abroad to prevent his supporters from sowing problems for the government.

Arroyo took the reins of power from Estrada after he was toppled by a military-backed popular revolt last week amid allegations

of massive corruption in his government.

Estrada was impeached by Congress in November and was being tried in the Senate. But his allies in the senate voted to suppress evidence that linked Estrada to secret bank accounts, triggering massive street protests that culminated in the uprising.

State prosecutors have begun criminal proceedings against the ex-president on several graft charges, including economic plunder, which carries the death penalty.

"There are litigations now. There are cases and the department of justice is pursuing them," Arroyo said.

European mission to test waters in Myanmar

BANGKOK, Jan 28: A European Union delegation is to visit Myanmar this week on a mission to judge the new mood in the military-run country and encourage the junta and the opposition to embark on an historic dialogue, reports AFP.

The four-member team arrives in the capital Yangon three weeks after the United Nations announced that opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi had held face-to-face talks with the junta's powerful number-three.

UN envoy Razali Ismail, who brokered the secret contacts, reported that they were paving the way for "more substantive discussions" which could end a decade of political deadlock.

Since then the regime has extended a series of concessions that have gone some way to improving the poisonous atmosphere between the two sides.

The septuagenarian vice-chairman of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), Tin Oo, was released from four months in detention last Thursday in a gesture aimed squarely at the European officials visit.

The developments have been greeted enthusiastically by the NLD as well as Yangon's diplomatic community and the network of dissidents living in exile. But the views of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for four months and largely out of touch with the outside world, remain unknown.

Sweden's ambassador to Bangkok Jan Axel Nordlander said the European Union team's three-day trip to Yangon beginning late Sunday, where they have been assured of a meeting with the Nobel peace laureate, comes at a critical time.

Oslo peace bid suffers more blows in Lanka

COLOMBO, Jan 28: Norway's attempts to broker peace in Sri Lanka has suffered another setback with the two antagonists rejecting a preliminary deal of peace talks, a press report here said Sunday, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) refused to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on a "staged and a reciprocal de-escalation" proposed by Norway, the privately-run Sunday Leader said.

The newspaper said that Norway's special envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, however, managed to prevent "imminent collapse" of the process by persuading the Tigers to extend their unilateral Christmas truce by a further month.

The Sri Lankan government has rejected LTTE calls to reciprocate their unilateral truce that

went into effect from Christmas Day. The government says a ceasefire can take place only after talks between the two sides begin.

The Norwegian attempts to broker peace are currently deadlocked on the issue of the truce. The LTTE says it has reserved the right to defensive war while the military in recent months escalated its offensive against the LTTE.

Sri Lanka says the LTTE has offered a unilateral ceasefire as a ploy to avoid being proscribed by the British government in line with London's new anti-terrorism laws that are expected to go into effect from next month.

The Tamil Tigers too have accused the government of not agreeing to the ceasefire in order to justify its diplomatic pressure on Britain to outlaw the LTTE which maintains its "international Secretariat" in London.



Bangladesh Ambassador KM Shehabuddin, Mrs. Shehabuddin and their daughter Sharmen with former President and Hillary Clinton who accorded a farewell reception recently at the White House in honour of Ambassadors accredited to USA and their spouses.

Bill Gates donates \$100 m to fight AIDS

WASHINGTON, Jan 28: Microsoft founder Bill Gates expanded his philanthropic activities Saturday, as his foundation announced a 100-million-dollar grant to help develop vaccines to fight AIDS, reports AFP.

"We should remember that a death from AIDS in Africa brings with it just as much pain as a death of one of our own family or friends," said the billionaire founder of computer giant Microsoft Corporation.

"A vaccine is the only way to end AIDS for all time," he added.

Considered the world's deadliest infectious disease at present, AIDS was responsible for the deaths of 500,000 children and 2.5 million adults last year, according to the World Health Organization.

Muslim rebels seek concessions from Manila before talks

ILIGAN, Philippines, Jan 28: The Philippines' main Muslim insurgent group on Sunday said it was willing to resume peace talks with Manila on condition that charges against its leaders were dropped and government troops were removed from its fallen camps, reports AFP.

Aleem Elias Macarandas, a member of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) peace panel, said the government of newly installed President Gloria Arroyo should grant these demands as a goodwill gesture.