

Global relief effort swings into gear in quake-hit areas

AFP, Ahmedabad

Rescuers pulled another survivor from the devastation of western India's earthquake Wednesday, even as rescue efforts gave way to a massive global relief operation five days after the disaster hit.

Just as hope seemed to have faded of finding anyone else alive, a joint Indian military and fire brigade team freed 55-year-old Jyotsnabhen Gandhi from the ruins of her four-storey apartment at 6:00 am (6:30 BST) in Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of Gujarat state. "It's a miracle that she is alive," Ahmedabad's municipal commissioner K. Kailashnathan told AFP. "She was inside for almost 120 hours. We had all given up hope."

Estimates of the death toll from Friday morning's quake in Gujarat, which measured 7.9 on the Richter scale, have gone as high as 100,000, although state officials have stuck to a figure of around 20,000.

The federal government put the number of confirmed dead at 7,162, with nearly 29,000 injured.

As relief operations entered their sixth day, the focus moved sharply away from search and rescue to caring for the tens of thousands of injured, traumatised and homeless, many of whom have lost their entire livelihoods.

The international response to India's worst quake in 50 years has been swift and comprehensive, with even arch-rival Pakistan flying in tents and blankets.

The International Red Cross has launched an appeal for 15 million dollars and flown in several plane-loads of supplies, including a mobile field hospital.

Along with food and water, doctors and medical supplies are in very short supply, especially in Gujarat's Kutch region where the quake's epicentre was located.

All over Kutch's cultural centre, Bhuj, bodies were being burned with little or no ceremony on hastily constructed funeral pyres, as concerns grew over the possible spread of disease.

On Tuesday, senior government officials had sought to ease the shock caused by Defence Minister George Fernandes' assessment that the final number of dead would exceed 100,000, with twice that number injured.

"Until all the bodies which are trapped below the debris are recovered, a precise figure cannot be given," clarified Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Home Minister L.K. Advani was more directly critical of his cabinet colleague.

"It is sure that the death toll in the earthquake affected state is in five digits but going beyond it and overestimating, it is felt, would lead to panic among the people," Advani said.

Gujarat, which is in an earthquake-prone zone, has a population of around 42 million and is one of India's most prosperous and industrialised states.

As tonnes of materials continued to pour in from overseas, international aid agencies were struggling to coordinate the relief effort.

"A disaster of this kind obviously throws up enormous logistical difficulties," said Patrick Fuller, regional information delegate for the International Federation of the Red Cross.



PHOTO: AFP

A member of a French rescue team along with his sniffer dog look for survivors among the debris of buildings collapsed in the main market in Bhuj town in Gujarat yesterday, which was devastated in a massive earthquake that struck western India on January 26.

I'm still president, says defiant Estrada

Philippine military reaffirms backing for Arroyo

AFP, Manila

A defiant ousted Philippine leader Joseph Estrada insisted Wednesday he was still president and challenged the legality of the appointment of Gloria Arroyo as his successor.

"I have not resigned. I am the duly elected president," Estrada told cheering party supporters nearly two weeks after Arroyo was installed by a military-backed popular uprising amid mass street protests.

Vice President Arroyo was sworn in as president by the supreme court chief justice after Estrada's government collapsed when the military and most of his cabinet ministers withdrew their support for him.

Estrada, making his first public appearance on Wednesday since his January 20 ouster, described the military's withdrawal of support for him as illegal, adding that armed forces chief Angelo Reyes "easily forgot and did not follow the constitution."

In an immediate response, Reyes reaffirmed his backing for the 53-year-old Arroyo, the former vice-president.

"The armed forces' position is that the legal and de facto and de jure president of the Philippines is Gloria Arroyo."

"She was sworn in by no less than the chief justice," Reyes told reporters.

Questioning Arroyo's constitutional legitimacy, Estrada said he was "only on leave," Arroyo was "still the vice-president" and "all the appointments she made were temporary."

"We are faced today with the grave and overpowering constitutional crisis that affects the foundations not just of the presidency but of our government and democratic institutions," Estrada said.

He noted that he was elected president by more than 10 million people, outnumbering the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets and pressured him to quit and backed Arroyo for the presidency.

Meanwhile, Philippine military chief General Angelo Reyes on Wednesday reaffirmed his backing for newly-installed President Gloria Arroyo, dismissing deposed leader Joseph Estrada's assertion that he was still president.

"The armed forces' position is that the legal and de facto and de jure president of the Philippines is Gloria Arroyo. She was sworn in by no less than the chief justice," Reyes said after Estrada questioned Arroyo's constitutional legitimacy.

Reyes also assured the public that the military was ready to quash any attempt to topple Arroyo, saying "the administration is standing on solid ground and it will remain (there)."

Megawati standing behind me, says Wahid

AFP, Jakarta

Embattled Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid said Wednesday he still had the key backing of his deputy as he braced for the release of an inquiry into two alleged financial scandals.

"Sister Mega supports me," Wahid told journalists at the presidential palace, after he met with several ministers, military and police chiefs at the house of Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri for security talks.

No details of the talks were released, but they came on the eve of the planned publication of an inquiry which according to a copy obtained by AFP has linked him to two multi-million dollar financial scandals.

Analysts say Megawati's support is crucial to the political future of

Wahid, whose leadership has been dogged by accusations of corruption and incompetence.

Megawati's party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), holds 185 seats in the 500-strong lower house of parliament making it the largest bloc.

The house is due to announce on Thursday whether it accepts or rejects the findings of a special inquiry, which say Wahid may be implicated in the scams.

Megawati has called on the PDIP to adopt a united stand and the party has assigned eight members to formulate its official response, one PDIP legislator said.

He said his faction would accept the inquiry's findings. "At the most, we will make some small modifications," said the MP, who declined to be named.

"More important is what follow-

up step we opt to take. The choice is whether to issue a memorandum, or wait for the results of a court."

"The political step would be to issue a memorandum as a harsh warning to the president," the MP continued. "If that happens, the rest is up to the President and how he decides to respond."

After 30 years of KKN, the Indonesian acronym for corruption, collusion and nepotism, he said, "we cannot tolerate even the slightest bit of KKN. This new government must be absolutely clean of all KKN."

Wahid could ultimately face impeachment depending on whether the parliament decides to sanction him over the findings.

But another PDIP MP, Abersson Sihalo, told AFP on Tuesday the lower house could hand over the findings to the Supreme Court for further legal processing.

Colombian plane hijack drama ends peacefully

AFP, Bogota

A deserter from Colombia's largest rebel group hijacked a plane at gunpoint with 30 people on board, forcing it to land in Bogota, where he was overpowered by the pilot and a passenger and arrested by military police late Tuesday.

All the passengers and crew of the Satena Airlines turboprop were unharmed in the six-hour ordeal, as negotiators tried to talk the rebel out of commandeering another plane to Spain, Colombian Air Force commander Hector Velasco told reporters here.

"He wasn't aggressive," Velasco said of the guerrilla he talked personally with aboard the plane. "He was bored of his life in the rebel forces and wanted to leave the country because he was afraid of being killed by the FARC."

Velasco said the hijacker was a 34-year-old university graduate who joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) two years ago as a technician. He left the rebel group because he was "mistreated" and lied to by his commanders, he added.

Although he pointed a nine-millimeter pistol at the plane's crew, the hijacker never threatened the passengers, Velasco said without disclosing his identity.

He was a "decent and intelligent" person, he added.

Details of the struggle that took place inside the plane on the tarmac of Catan military base, adjacent to Bogota's Eldorado International Airport, remain sketchy.

Velasco said the plane's pilot Jorge Duran managed to overpower and disarm the hijacker when he appeared to be distracted, at about 10:00 pm (9:00 BST).

Authorities took all 26 hostages remaining aboard the plane to Eldorado International Airport. They did not speak to reporters.

Four passengers, including a young girl, had been released earlier by the hijacker for health reasons.

The drama began at 4:30 pm (3:30 BST) when the hijacker boarded the state-owned Satena airliner during a routine stop in San Neiva in southeastern Colombia, Velasco said.

Pinochet 'worried but calm' about arrest, trial

AFP, Santiago

Augusto Pinochet is "worried but calm" about his arrest and impending trial on human-rights abuse charges, a Chilean television network reported Tuesday, in the first public reaction by the elderly ex-president to his historic indictment.

A reporter for Megavisión was able to speak briefly with Pinochet at his rural Los Boldos residence in Bucalemu, 120 km southwest of Santiago, where he has been recovering from a slight stroke on Saturday.

The network did not air footage of the interview, only a transcript.

"I am aware that my opponents will not rest until they sink me," Pinochet reportedly said.

The 85-year-old general, dictator of Chile from 1973 to 1990, was taking a stroll on one of his terraces, dressed in a white shirt, gray pants and canvas shoes. He had difficulty speaking, the report said.

Suu Kyi optimistic over talks with junta

AFP, Bangkok

Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi told a visiting EU delegation she was cautiously optimistic about talks with Myanmar's junta and hopes they will lead to an official dialogue, sources said Wednesday.

The five-member European Union team met with Aung San Suu Kyi for more than two hours Tuesday at her lakeside residence where she has been confined by the military regime since September 22.

It was her first confirmed contact with foreign diplomats since UN

envoy Razali Ismail visited her twice earlier this month.

Razali later revealed that the Nobel peace laureate had met twice with junta number-three Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt and that the opposition and the junta were edging towards their first dialogue since 1994.

Aung San Suu Kyi expressed "cautious optimism" over the ongoing initial talks and said she hoped they would "lead to more substantive official ones," a diplomatic source who met with the EU delegation told AFP.

The EU officials found the opposition leader "in good health and in high spirits ... and quite comfortable with her present living conditions," he said.

The Swedish-led delegation arrived in Yangon Sunday to investigate the new mood in the military-run country and to encourage the junta and the opposition to break their decade-long political deadlock. On Monday they held talks with Foreign Minister Win Aung and Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, the powerful head of military intelligence.