

Funeral pyres dot India's quake-hit region as hope fades for more survivors

REUTERS, Bhuj

Thousands of funeral pyres dotted India's devastated earthquake zone yesterday as workers burnt bodies to stave off the threat of disease, while tens of thousands struggle to stay alive a week after the disaster.

Survivors, whose relatives bodies were still unretrieved, waited their turn for the rescue teams to arrive and begin digging under what were once their homes.

Hemant Shah, a resident of a multi-storied building in Bhuj, the worst hit town in last Friday's quake, said he had initially hoped his mother would come out alive.

But now, his vigil at the edge of the massive mound of concrete slabs and twisted iron was to ensure her body was retrieved with as little damage as possible.

"I have been here the whole day, from the time they started work till 7.30 pm when they finished," he said.

Residents of the building said 11 bodies had already been pulled out and yesterday some of those were seen lined up along the road awaiting cremation.

In a neighbouring building, Hiren Joshi has also been waiting for the body of his mother.

"I come and sit here everyday..." he said, breaking off in grief.

The town of Bhuj was 20-km from the epicentre of the

quake, which registered 7.9 on the Richter scale and killed at least 30,000 people and left many more homeless.

In New Delhi, a senior government official said the army had cordoned off the old part of Bhuj town and Anjar following a request from the local administration which was worried about thefts and burglaries from the abandoned homes.

Many Indian families retain a large part of their savings in gold jewellery stashed away in steel cupboards and authorities were worried over the safety of peoples' assets.

Although no cases of typhoid or cholera have been reported, officials were worried an epidemic could break out across the western state of Gujarat.

"Sewage pipes and water pipes have been crushed and intermingled. We had started water supply on Thursday, but immediately stopped it," Mayji Bai Sorathia, Chairman of the Water Works Committee of the Municipality of Anjar, the second worst-hit town, said.

"We have enough water but it is very dangerous to supply it."

Gujarat's Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel told reporters on Thursday that the government has taken measures to prevent the spread of disease, including putting fish that feed on mosquito larvae in lakes and chemical spraying.

Some survivors also complained that they were not receiving enough food and sheltering material despite large volumes of aid flowing into the region.

Government officials defended their relief efforts saying there were some initial supply bottlenecks which has since been addressed.

The government too has been working under difficult circumstances as state employees, also hit by the quake, were not reporting to work, they said.

In Ahmedabad, the state's biggest city, the army began dynamiting the shells of crumbled buildings.

"We have identified 30 such buildings which need to be pulled down," an official of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation said.

Authorities said that the sheer magnitude of the disaster has so far overshadowed the even greater task of rebuilding the lives of thousands left homeless and jobless.

The federal government announced fresh taxes on Thursday to pay for the task. A two per cent surcharge on income and corporate taxes, to be levied as soon as an ordinance was implemented, was expected to raise 13 billion rupees (\$280 million).

India has sought assistance of \$1.5 billion from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

The state government has estimated that the total cost of the earthquake would be 100 billion rupees (\$2.15 billion).



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian army unit carries a newly retrieved body from out of a collapsed house on Thursday. Authorities fear that water contaminated by rotting corpses may lead to an outbreak of diarrhoea and gastro-enteritis amongst the quake-affected population. Though relief is streaming in for earthquake victims, poor infrastructure and organisation have caused delays in supplies reaching more remote areas.

Quake prompts contact between Vajpayee, Musharraf

AFP, New Delhi

The Gujarat quake tragedy emerged yesterday as the catalyst for the first direct contact between the leaders of India and Pakistan in well over a year.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said he intended to telephone Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, to discuss the impact of the January 26 quake.

"I will speak to Musharraf on the phone and inform him of the magnitude of the devastation," Vajpayee was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India.

It would be the first contact between the two rival leaders since Musharraf came to power in a coup in October 1999.

"It is at times of distress that people come together and share grief," Vajpayee said, when asked if issues apart from the Gujarat quake would be discussed.

The quake, measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, ravaged a huge area of Gujarat state and the death toll has been estimated at anywhere between 25,000 and 100,000.

Pakistan has so far sent two plane loads of tents and blankets for the quake victims.

Clinton hopes to be friend for life with Tony Blair

REUTERS, London

Former US President Bill Clinton expects to be "friends for life" with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Clinton said in an interview published yesterday that he was very fond of Britain, where he had spent two of the best years of his life as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University.

While handing out praise to former British prime minister John Major and royal heir Prince Charles, Clinton also spoke of his warmth towards Blair.

"I have to tell you I am great admirer of Tony," Clinton told The Mirror newspaper. "He is now one of the senior leaders of the world. He and I will be friends for life."

"We worked closely together on many major issues, including the Balkans."

But Clinton said it was unlikely that he would see Blair when he visits Washington this month for talks with President George W. Bush.

Acquitted Lockerbie suspect arrives in Libya

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah, who was acquitted of all charges against him in the Lockerbie bombing trial, arrived in Tripoli Thursday to a hero's welcome aboard a Dutch military aircraft, Libyan television showed.

Fhimah, 44, dressed in white traditional dress and a black hat, was welcomed by members of his family, friends and a pack of journalists.

He gave a victory sign as he emerged from the Dutch air force Hercules bearing United Nations insignia, before being swept up and escorted to an airport reception room by a crowd ululating and chanting "Allahu Akbar!" (God is Greatest!).

Fhimah was reunited with his family, including his two sons, the eldest of whom told waiting cameras: "I am very happy at this splendid occasion."

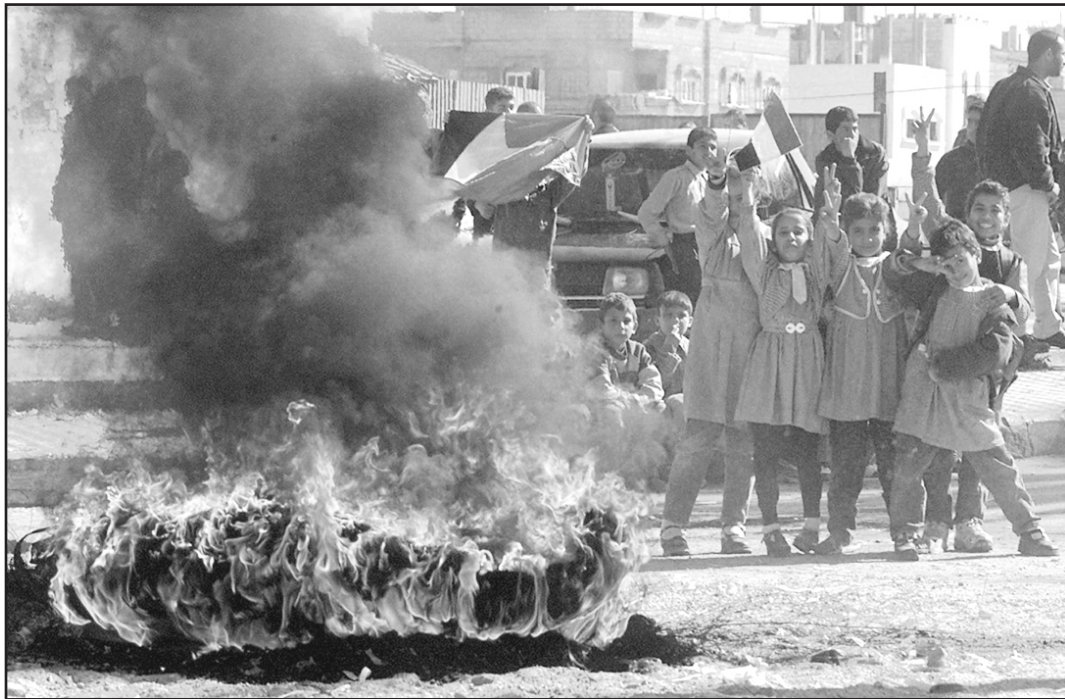


PHOTO: AFP

School children flash the V-sign during the funeral of Palestinian Ismail Ahmed Atilbani, 50, and Saber Abu Daher, 35, in the refugee camp of Maggazi on Thursday. Atilbani and Daher were killed yesterday by Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip.

Barak calls for 'separation from Palestinians'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak called yesterday for a "separation from the Palestinians", following the murder of a Jewish settler by Palestinians in the West Bank.

"We shall do all we can to safeguard Israeli citizens, and thus it is necessary to bring about a separation from the Palestinians", said Barak in a statement.

"We shall do all that is possible to achieve this within an agreement, but if this is not possible we will perform an initiated and staggered security disengagement", the statement from Barak's office added.

Shmouel Gillis, a 42-year-old doctor at Shaare Tzedek hospital in Jerusalem who lived in the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, was killed Thursday when his car came under fire as he drove above the al-Arub Palestinian refugee camp between Hebron and Bethlehem.

The outgoing prime minister, who faces elections on Tuesday for the head of government post which he is almost certain to lose, denounced the murder and promised the "attackers would not go unpunished".

Barak's Friday statement would involve a unilateral

Israeli decision on the borders of the Palestinian territories, implying a withdrawal from some of the isolated Jewish settlements.

Several times over the past few weeks, Barak has called for a unilateral separation from the Palestinians if no peace agreement could be reached with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian authority.

The Palestinian uprising and the daily attacks in Israel and the Palestinian territories have put the idea of a physical separation between Israel and the Palestinians back in the limelight.

But Barak's project is likely to be aborted by his right-wing rival in the February 6 election, Ariel Sharon, whom he trails by 17 to 21 percentage points, only four days before the vote.

Earlier Thursday, Israeli civilian Lior Atlas, 23, died in another drive-by shooting attack, as he was shot several times by Palestinians who opened fire near the northern West Bank town of Jenin, in a zone under Israeli security control, the army said.

Two Palestinians were also killed on Thursday, bringing to 393 the number of lives claimed by the intifada since September 28.

France to allow women to pass family name to children

AFP, Paris

The French National Assembly's law commission on Thursday endorsed a bill that will allow parents to give the mother's family name to a child.

The bill, which is set for a vote next week, states that children can be given their mother's or their father's family name or the name of both parents.

Until now only the father's family name was recognised.

"The bill was drafted taking into account equality between the sexes and changes in the family structure," said Gerard Gouzes, a member of the commission.

He said the new law would help prevent certain names disappearing over the generations in families where there are no male children.

The Socialist bill would allow children born before the law comes into effect to request that their family name includes both their father's and mother's names.

Suspect arrested in Denmark over killing of black teenager

AFP, Copenhagen

Danish police said yesterday that they had arrested a suspected neo-Nazi youth wanted in Norway in connection with the killing last week of a black teenager.

Officers picked up 19-year-old Joe Erling Jahr at Copenhagen railway station on Thursday after he was caught trying to travel without a ticket, said a police spokesman.

He was due to appear in court early yesterday and could be extradited to Norway immediately, a senior police officer said.

The killing shocked Norway last Friday of 15-year-old Benjamin Labaren Hermansen, born to a Norwegian mother and a Ghanaian father.

He died of multiple stab wounds to the stomach and chest in a car park in Oslo's residential suburbs.

On Thursday 40,000 people packed the streets of Oslo to protest against what is being seen as a racially motivated killing, to rally against racism in Norway and show support for the victim's family.

Brazilian doctors accused of killing children for organs

AFP, Sao Paulo

Authorities in northern Brazil have charged two doctors with castrating and murdering at least eight children in order to sell their internal organs and use their genitals in satanic rituals.

Doctors Anisio Ferreira de Souza and Cesio Favio Caldas have been arrested and jailed, Judge Luiz Ernane Ferreira Malato said. The two operated a hospital that included a maternity ward in the city of Altamira, in the northern state of Para.

"What happened was they took out the child's sexual organ, even the internal part. The youths did not resist and bled to death," the judge said.

Two other youths were castrated but survived, Malato said.

The doctors were well known for low prices and even treated prisoners and police officers for free.

Pinochet's attorneys appeal for dismissal of arrest order

AFP, Santiago

Defence attorneys for Chilean former dictator Augusto Pinochet appealed Thursday for the case against him to be dropped and an arrest order lifted.

Pinochet lawyer Gustavo Collao told journalists here that he had personally filed two motions with the Santiago Court of Appeals seeking to overturn a judge's order placing the 85-year-old dictator under house arrest and ordering him to answer murder and kidnapping charges.

The ailing, 85-year-old Pinochet, who ruled Chile with an iron fist from 1973 to 1990, was ordered detained on Wednesday and officially informed of murder and kidnapping charges against him stemming from a 1973 military campaign to wipe out opposition to his rule.

The arrest warrant was delivered to Pinochet on behalf of investigating judge Juan Guzman at the ex-dictator's seaside Los Baldos residence, 120 kilometres southwest of Santiago.

Court sources told AFP that appellate judges will begin next week to review the appeals.

The appeals had long been expected. Even before judge Guzman's arrest order was delivered to Pinochet, the ex-dictator's lawyers said they would fight the order on appeal.

Pinochet refused even to acknowledge that he had been put under house arrest by declining to sign the order when it was delivered on Wednesday.

He has steadfastly maintained his innocence of the charges in connection with the so-called "Caravan of Death," a military campaign to wipe out opposition to his rule.

He is accused of masterminding the killings and abductions of 75 political prisoners carried out by the "Caravan of Death" in the first weeks after his rise to power in a September 1973 coup.

Guzman's order reinstated charges filed against Pinochet on December 1 that were voided December 20 by Chile's Supreme Court. The high court ruled that Guzman had failed to interrogate Pinochet or have him submit to medical tests.

Medical tests and a brief interrogation were conducted earlier this month.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (C) and First Lady Laura Bush (L) smile as they are applauded at the conclusion of the National Prayer Breakfast on Thursday at the Washington Hilton Hotel. The breakfast is an annual event that brings together religious, political, business and social leaders of the US.

Bush defends faith-based charity initiative

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush sought Thursday to mollify critics of his plan to use faith-based groups as front-line troops in the battle against social ills, vowing never to impose his beliefs on the nation.

Critics have charged that the initiative, which could send billions of federal dollars to religious charities fighting homelessness and drug addiction, threatens to breach the constitutionally erected wall between church and state.

"An American president serves people of every faith, and serves some of no faith," Bush told some 4,000 guests at the annual National Prayer Breakfast, which organisers say every US president has attended since its inception 51 years ago.

"We do not impose any religion, we welcome all religions. We do not prescribe any prayer, we welcome all prayers. This is the tradition of our nation, and it will be the standard of my administration."

"Our plan will not favour religious institutions over non-religious institutions. As president, I'm interested in what is constitutional," he said.

But as he addressed a crowd that included foreign dignitaries, Bush also touted the importance of religion in US history and public life and passionately defended the power of faith.

"Faith crosses every border and touches every heart in every nation," he told a packed ballroom at a posh hotel, home this year to the non-denominational event.

"It has sustained me in moments of success and in moments of disappointment. Without it, I'd be a different person. And without it, I doubt I'd be here today," the US leader declared.

And he renewed his vow to place faith-based groups at the centre of his administration's social policy, saying: "My administration will put the federal government squarely on the side of America's armies of compassion."

500 die of cold in Afghanistan

AFP, Islamabad

More than 500 people have died of cold in squalid displacement camps in western Afghanistan in the past three days, officials with the ruling Taliban militia were quoted as saying in a report yesterday.

Taliban refugee repatriation department chief Syed Raz Mohammad Agha told the News daily that 504 people had died in freezing temperatures, in addition to the 110 deaths the United Nations confirmed earlier this week.

The deaths were recorded in displacement camps in western Afghanistan near the city of Herat, where some 80,000 people have gathered after being driven from their villages by the worst drought in memory.

The report could not be independently confirmed but aid workers said the figure sounded exaggerated.

The Taliban has claimed that UN political sanctions imposed last month for the militia's refusal to hand over indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden would cause a humanitarian catastrophe.

UN officials earlier this week said 110 people had died of cold on Monday night, but updated figures were not yet available.

The drought has put at risk the lives of more than 300,000 people, or roughly 50,000 families, in western Afghanistan, the UN said.

Temperatures around Herat have plunged as low as minus 25 degrees Celsius (minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit), but the camps are short of non-food items such as blankets and tents.