

38 trapped in Indian coal mine

AFP, Ranchi

Indian divers Saturday were trying to rescue 38 miners trapped at a colliery in the eastern state of Jharkhand by water gushing in from an adjacent mine.

The state-owned Bharat Coking Coal Ltd. mine said its workers were trapped when water flooded the Bagdih mine Friday in Dhanbad, some 120 kilometres (74 miles) northeast of Ranchi, the state capital.

Dhanbad's deputy district commissioner Vinod Kispoto said that of the 51 miners trapped, 13 had been rescued, and an operation was still on to reach the others.

"Divers have been pressed into service to try and rescue the 38 trapped miners from drowning in the underground mine. But chances of rescue look bleak," said Kispoto.

He added that two water pumps had been working round the clock to drain the flooded mine.

"We are also using smaller pumps borrowed from neighbouring collieries, but it could take days to drain out all the water," Kispoto said.

V.S. Srivastava, general manager of the neighbouring Lodna mine also owned by Bharat Coking Coal Ltd said two attempts to send down rescue teams had failed.

Militants call strike in Assam today

AFP, Guwahati

Two separatist rebel groups in India's Assam have called a dawn-to-dusk general strike for Sunday to coincide with Home Minister L.K. Advani's visit to the troubled north-eastern state.

The strike was called by the powerful United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), both fighting for independent homelands.

"We urge the people of Assam to boycott all public functions and meetings to be addressed by the home minister during his visit," NDFB chairman D.R. Nabla said in a joint statement Saturday.

Advani is coming to assess the security situation in Assam following stepped-up rebel attacks that have claimed more than 200 lives in the past four months.

Most of the victims have been non-Assamese traders.

Lanka on red alert

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's security forces and police stepped up security ahead of Sunday's 53rd anniversary of independence from Britain, officials here said.

Police cordoned off the highway to the national parliament grounds where the main official celebration headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga is due to take place, officials said.

"All arrangements are in place and our request is for the invitees to be in their seats before the roads close again on Sunday morning at 8.00 am (0800 BST)," public administration minister Richard Pathirana said.

Police said additional units had been drawn from areas outside the capital to beef up the security arrangements in and around the capital ahead of freedom day celebrations.

The national day is being marked as government forces remain locked in combat with the separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas in the island's northeast.

Major tremor hits Gujarat

Rescue workers of the world united in hope of finding last survivors

AFP, Ahmedabad

A major tremor, measuring 5.0 on the Richter scale, rocked the quake-ravaged Indian state of Gujarat on Saturday, sparking panic among traumatised residents.

A seismological official in Gujarat's commercial capital said the epicentre was located some 25 kilometres (15 miles) north of Bachao -- one of the town's worst hit by the 7.6 magnitude quake which struck on January 26.

"The tremor was felt all over the state, but so far we have no reports of any fresh damage or casualties," the official said.

The tremor was the second-strongest aftershock to hit Gujarat since the main quake. A tremor measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale was recorded on January 28.

The tremor was felt in Ahmedabad, where residents, fearful of another major disaster, ran from their houses in panic.

Meanwhile, hopes of finding just one more person alive in the rubble of India's Gujarat state are motivating international teams of rescuers in their relentless search eight days after the quake in which tens of thousands died.

"So far we've only found dead people," says a rueful Russ Vaughan of the British International Rescue Dogs, speaking from his team's tent at the centre of the devastated city of Bhuj, just 20 kilometres (15 miles) from the epicentre of the January 26 quake.

Around him, 15 teams of rescuers hailing from the four corners of the globe, each flying the flag of their nation, voiced similar disappointment.

Some of the rescuers, many who joined the relief efforts as independent volunteers, had arrived fresh from working the earthquake disaster in El Salvador.

On Saturday morning two delegates of the United Nations raised a wind breaker, emblazoned with the organisation's familiar sky blue badge, in the shelter of which the teams convened a co-ordination meeting.

Raising their voices against the constant whirr of electric generators, each team leader came to report the trials and tribulations of the search being undertaken in Bhuj and surrounding villages.

"We found a small four-year-old girl, but she had died," reported Paul Nel, a member of the 39-strong team of South African rescue workers, mainly from Johannesburg and Pretoria.

"Our dog yesterday managed to find somebody still alive, but we weren't able to free them," a rescuer from Andalusia in Spain, whose standard bears the logo of his team's dog food-manufacturing sponsor, said in faltering English.

All the rescuers work in healthy competition, driven by the same goal of finding one person still alive, their experiences having taught them never to give up hope.



PHOTO: AFP

An elderly man, along with his granddaughter and his dog, tries to get warm from a fire as they wait for relief in front of their makeshift tent beside a road in Bachao yesterday. Relief efforts are in full swing following last week's 7.9 magnitude earthquake, the worst in 50 years in India that left at least 30,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands homeless in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

Megawati now eyes presidency

AP, Jakarta

She is adored by millions as the daughter of Indonesia's founding father, but has long been dismissed as an intellectual lightweight by the elite.

Now Megawati Sukarnoputri has become the country's president-in-waiting and looks set to return to the state palace where she grew up.

Incumbent head of state Abdurrahman Wahid politically outmaneuvered her for the top job 15 months ago and took her on as his deputy.

Today, his political career is on the ropes after parliament this week censured him over his alleged involvement into two corruption scandals, raising the specter of impeachment.

Wahid's troubles have thrust Megawati, 54, into the limelight for the first time since the country's electoral college chose him over her in October 1999.

Ironically, the lawmakers who overlooked her then are looking to her now.

"Megawati is ready to take the

lead," said Jacob Tobing, a prominent member of parliament.

Although she is Wahid's partner, she has had little to do with the

running of the government after being sidelined by the president and left to do mainly ceremonial work.

But he may have done her a favour. With few responsibilities, she was not tainted by his troubles.

For a long time, she has criticised and even lampooned for not speak-

ing out. She has rarely given interviews and limited her public utterances to prepared speeches.

Her critics pointed to her reticence as proof that she lacked the intellectual heft to run the country.

But with Wahid increasingly discredited by his mercurial temperament and contradictory statements, many Indonesians have come to view Megawati's silence as golden.

Much of her popularity is rooted in her pedigree. She is the eldest daughter of Sukarno, who declared independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1945.

Sukarno united the sprawling, ethnically diverse archipelago and his memory is still revered by many. He was ousted from the presidency in 1967, a year after the military crushed an alleged communist coup attempt.

"It is useful for Megawati to be seen as the successor to her father's legacy," said George Adijondro, a professor at Australia's Newcastle University. "She can use the past to fight the problems of the present."



Sharif's nephew arrested

AFP, Lahore

A nephew of Pakistan's exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was arrested here on Saturday following his return home from Saudi Arabia, police said.

Yusuf Abbas, 18, was taken into custody from his residence, a senior police official told AFP.

The official, who did not want to be named, refused to give any reasons for the arrest of Abbas, who had arrived here from Saudi Arabia last week.

Sharif was exiled to the kingdom in December by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, along with a score of close relatives, under an arrangement brokered by the Saudi royal family.

Sharif, ousted in a military coup in October 1999, cannot return to Pakistan for 10 years.

Acting president of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party, Makhdoom Javed Hashmi, expressed his "shock" at the arrest.

"Yusuf returned home only to pursue his studies and was about to take his exams. He has nothing to do with politics," Hashmi said.

Siddique remains US envoy

Ambassador Osman Siddique will remain the United States envoy to Fiji, Nauru, Tonga and Tuvalu, the US embassy announced, according to a report received in Dhaka yesterday.

The ambassador says he is "honoured and humbled" to be appointed again.

Siddique, who was appointed by the Clinton Administration, will continue to serve as ambassador under new president George Bush.

It is customary in the US that the ambassador resign following a change in government and Siddique had handed over his resignation last month.

The embassy said the decision to retain Siddique as the ambassador in Suva demonstrated America's strong interest in Fiji, particularly at this point in its history, and the other countries in the region.

Siddique said he did not have a time contract as his appointment was a political one and would remain ambassador as long as the Bush administration wanted him to.

When asked about the US government's stand on the political situation here in Fiji, he said the US government was committed to the principles of democracy and upholding human rights and would therefore continue to press Fiji for a peaceful return to constitutional democracy.

Joseph Kabila keen to begin talks with political rivals

REUTERS, United Nations

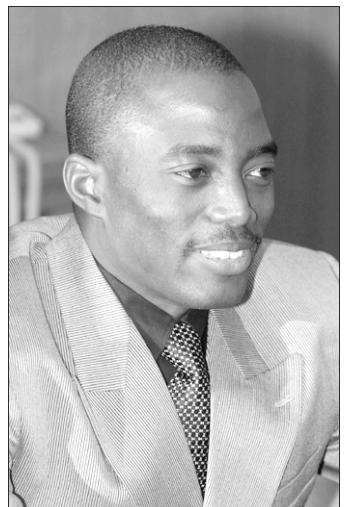
Congo's new President Joseph Kabila told the United Nations on Friday he was willing to begin a dialogue with his military and political enemies and urged them to reciprocate "without reservations."

"We want to bring together all the Congolese while at the same time respecting differences among them," Kabila said, referring to military and civilian opponents.

Addressing the UN Security Council, Kabila appealed to the United Nations for a speedy deployment of a peacekeeping force and said his country would put no obstacles in the way of the UN troops helping to end what has been called Africa's first world war.

He also said he needed UN assistance to plan "free and transparent" elections but have no date. However, Kabila said polls would only take place once the Rwandan and Ugandan "aggressors" left the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Kabila, 29, took office last month following the assassination of his father Laurent Kabila, who refused to negotiate with rebels or with Ketumile Masire of Botswana, chosen as a mediator by African



leaders.

Kabila told reporters that an investigation into his father's murder should be completed within three weeks.

Rwanda and Uganda, which helped put the elder Kabila in power in 1997, turned on him a year later and backed rebels trying to topple him. Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola then sent in soldiers to

bolster the ragged Congolese army.

When asked if would accept Masire as mediator, Kabila told reporters the Congolese could have a dialogue without him. But if Masire was needed, one would have to resolve earlier disputes first. The elder Kabila had accused Masire, a former Botswana president, of partiality.

"We reiterate our urgent appeal to all political actors as well as members of the civil society to joint without reservations," Kabila said, speaking in French and English.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the council there had hardly been any cease-fire violations over the last two weeks. "The time appears right to for a resolute effort to implement the (peace) agreement, and to start a genuine dialogue among all Congolese on the future of their country," he said.

Echoing Annan, British ambassador Jeremy Greenstock told Kabila: "You have the most important role to play, sir, not just in moving forward dialogue among the Congolese parties to the conflict but much more generally in creating an atmosphere that will allow truly open and representative dialogue to flourish."

Clinton to pay for gifts received last year

AP, Washington

Former US President Bill Clinton and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton will pay for nearly 86,000 dollar worth of gifts they chose to keep last year, his office said, seeking to remove the whiff of impropriety that clouded their exit from the White House.

The payback amounts to about half the value of the gifts Clinton and his wife reported they intended to keep when he left office on Jan. 20. An aide to Hillary, the new Democratic senator from New York, said on Friday the reimbursement was also an attempt to stem criticism that has surrounded her first weeks on Capitol Hill.

The aide, speaking on condition of anonymity, emphasised that both the former president and his wife would pay for the gifts.

Earlier Friday, Clinton announced that the government would be billed for only half the 600,000 dollar annual rent on a Manhattan office. The aide said that, too, was intended to deflect criticism.

The gifts include 7,375 dollars worth of furniture received from Denise Rich, the ex-wife of a fugitive financier pardoned by Clinton on his last day in office -- a move that has prompted a congressional investigation.

"As have other presidents and their families before us, we received gifts over the course of our eight years in the White House and followed all of the gift rules," Clinton said in a statement faxed to news agencies by his chief of staff, Karen Tramontano.

"While we gave the vast majority of gifts we received to the National Archives, we reported those gifts that we were keeping," the statement said. "To eliminate even the slightest question, we are taking the step of paying for gifts given to us in 2000."

The Clinton's would pay for 85,966 dollar worth of gifts they say received in 2000. Clinton said other gifts were handed to the national Archives.

There was a discrepancy between that figure and more than 190,000 dollars in gifts disclosed on Clinton's financial disclosure report for 2000, released the day before he left office.