

Thousands flee homes to escape drought in India

Reservoirs drying up amid heat wave, 23 killed

AP, New Delhi

With reservoirs and rivulets drying up under a scorching sun, hundreds of thousands of people are fleeing their homes to escape drought conditions in three Indian states, including the earthquake-devastated Gujarat, officials said yesterday.

An opposition lawmaker and newspapers reported 23 deaths due to malnutrition and hot weather.

Wild animals are straying into villages in search of water in eastern Orissa state.

The capital, New Delhi, suffers power shutdowns of an hour or more several times a day, as the utility tries to distribute electricity to different neighborhoods. Demand for power to run fans and air conditioners exceeds supply.

Men and women walk 8-10 km daily to fetch water for their families to survive in the northwestern desert state of Rajasthan, grappling with a severe drought for the third straight year because monsoon rains have consistently failed. Nearly 32 million people and 40 million cattle are suffering from lack of water and shortage of food.

"It's one of the severest droughts in living memory. Out of 32 districts, 31 are facing acute shortage of water. More than 30,000 villages have about a 50 per cent deficit in crop yield, jeopardizing the lives of 32 million people," said Rajasthan's Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot.

The shortage of drinking water has hit the urban population as well,

Gehlot said.

Still recovering from a January 26 earthquake that killed an estimated 30,000 people and buried towns and villages, neighboring Gujarat is now battling a drought.

In Orissa, all but two of 30 districts have been hit by drought, officials said. Daily temperatures are soaring to 45 Celsius (113 Fahrenheit).

The state government has confirmed one death. Bhalu Behera, 70, died of sun stroke in Ghoradia, a coastal village in Khurda district, last Sunday. Newspaper reports, however, put the death toll at 20.

Debi Prasad Mishra, the state's junior health minister, said the government has received reports of more deaths but they are still being checked. The worst affected are the wild elephants who require large amounts of water. "Elephants require huge quantities of water both for bathing and to satisfy their thirst. The water shortage is affecting them to a greater degree," said Mohanty.

At least 17 people and three elephants died last year when elephants encroached into human habitats in the state's Khurda and Dhenkanal districts. Orissa has 1,827 wild elephants, according to the forest department.

The federal government is rushing tankers of water and food in trains to Rajasthan. The state is offering work to the poorest people at 45-60 rupees (90 cents to dlr 1.5) per day, but thousands are still migrating in search of food and water.

N Korea to continue missile sale

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Il vowed his country would continue to sell missiles and technology abroad despite his commitment to a test moratorium, a senior EU official said yesterday.

South Korea's President Kim Dae-Jung said however that the landmark EU mission to Pyongyang this week would still help to thaw the frozen dialogue between the communist North and the United States.

Kim Jong-Il said the sales of missiles and weapon technology was "part of trade," according to EU foreign and security policy chief, Javier Solana, who was part of the delegation that travelled to the communist country this week.

Kim promised to keep a 1999 moratorium on missile tests until at least 2003 during talks Thursday with the EU mission led by Prime Minister Goeran Persson of Sweden.

"On the export of technology, the answer was much more negative," Solana told a news conference in Seoul. And accusations of state-sponsored terrorism have kept North Korea on the US list of rogue states.

Arroyo firmly in power

Philippines military reaffirms support

AP, Manila

The military says President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is "firmly in the saddle" yesterday as her officials warn danger is still present after an alleged attempt to topple the government.

Ten days before key local and congressional elections, Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes said Friday the military is fully behind Arroyo and "the situation has greatly stabilised" at the end of a week of coup rumors and political violence.

His statement to DZRH radio came after the government accused opposition leaders of plotting to kill Arroyo and her jailed predecessor, Joseph Estrada, to seize power.

"We don't know whether the calm that we have now is the eye of the storm," Justice Secretary Hernando Perez told a Supreme Court hearing for two politicians accused of involvement in Tuesday's attempt by 50,000 Estrada backers to storm the presidential palace. "We have intelligence reports that all is not well."

The plot allegedly involved blamming the government for Estrada's planned death, Perez said.

The powerful Manila Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Sin also offered support to Arroyo, a close ally, Friday.

"Less than what you did would have been weakness," he wrote in a letter to Arroyo. "More than what you did would have been authoritarianism. You exercised magnanimity and admirable tolerance toward the rallyists even if they were attacking you personally."

Meanwhile, police continued to search for fugitive opposition leaders, accused of inciting rebellion, while one opposition candidate asked election officials to postpone May 14 local and congressional elections.

National Security Adviser Rollo Agolez said Friday police received numerous tips, most of them mistaken or false, on the whereabouts of opposition Senate candidates Gregorio Honasan and Panfilo Lacson, the former national police chief.

Arroyo declared a "state of rebellion," giving police power to arrest without warrant, Tuesday after clashes between Estrada supporters and security forces left six dead and

more than 100 wounded. Arroyo then ordered the arrest of 11 opposition leaders, accusing them of inciting the violence. She said she will cancel the state of rebellion order on Monday.

At least four of the 11, including reelectionist Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile, are in custody amid election campaigning for 3,500 Senate, House of Representatives and municipal seats nationwide. The elections are widely seen as a proxy war between Arroyo and her jailed predecessor.

Arroyo briefly visited Estrada in his cell south of Manila on Thursday. It was the first time the two met face to face since Sept. 26 before Arroyo rescinded of pocketing millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks during 31 months in office.

Authorities said Thursday that police may also arrest two of Estrada's sons on accusations of inciting the crowd to violence. Another son was jailed last week with his father, both on the capital offense of plunder.



100 feared dead as ferry sinks in Congo

AP, Kigali

Rescuers recovered seven bodies after a ferry moored at the lakeside town of Goma in eastern Congo capsized and sank as passengers rushed aboard to escape a heavy downpour, officials said yesterday.

As many as 100 people were feared perished when the MV Musaka sank Thursday evening, Jean-Pierre Lola, an official in the rebel Congolese Rally for Democracy, or RCD, which control Goma and its surrounding region.

The weight of luggage already on board, as well as that of passengers and well-wishers who scrambled to get out of the rain, far exceeded the capacity of the vessel, Moise Nyarugabo, another RCD official, said by telephone.

"People jumped off the boat and others swam to safety or were rescued before the vessel sunk

completely," he said.

But the victims were not quick enough to get off and many remain trapped inside the vessel, which can carry between 100 and 150 passengers, Lola said. His group lacked the necessary equipment to mount a proper rescue operation, he added.

Rescue workers were busy trying to moor the sunken ferry to prevent it from being dragged into deeper water by currents sweeping lake Kivu, one of a string of volcanic lakes that stretches along Congo's eastern border.

The ferry was scheduled to sail to Bukavu at the southern end of the lake.

Ferries are the most common and cheapest means of transportation between the two lakeside towns in a country whose infrastructure has been destroyed by a succession of armed rebellions and neglect by corrupt and greedy leaders.



PHOTO: AFP

Muslim mobs flee as police fire teargas yesterday outside a mosque in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo. Police tried to break up the mobs who attacked police and vehicles after the Juma prayers to protest what they called violence against members of their community at a central town earlier in the week.

Pre-polls violence claim 10 in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least eight political activists and two separatist rebels have died in violence during the run up to elections in the troubled state of Assam in India's northeast, police said yesterday.

Six activists of the state's ruling party, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), were killed late Thursday when militants of the banned United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) attacked the AGP office in Bogrihati, 80 km west of Guwahati, a police spokesman said.

"A group of heavily-armed ULFA militants stormed the election office and opened indiscriminate fire with automatic weapons killing six party AGP activists on the spot and injuring as many," he told AFP.

"Two AGP activists with serious gunshot wounds died in hospital on Friday morning."

In separate incidents, Indian federal troops shot dead two ULFA militants in encounters in the province's Bongaigaon district.

The attacks are the latest in a string of poll-related violence by the ULFA in the run-up to the May 10 elections in the oil-rich Assam.

Japan deports man presumed to be N Korean leader's son

AFP, Beijing

A man reported to be the son of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il arrived in Beijing yesterday after being deported from Japan for using a false passport, witnesses said.

The man, who has given his name as Kim Jong-Nam, was whisked off the All Nippon Airways (ANA) flight along with two women and a child and put in a waiting car on the airport tarmac, said the sources.

One of the women is reported to be his wife, the other a relative and the boy his four-year-old son.

Reporters have gathered outside the North Korean embassy in Beijing but no vehicle has entered the complex since the ANA plane landed at 1:20 pm (11:20 BST).

Security was stepped up outside the embassy during the afternoon, with the usual contingent of four or five People's Armed Police boosted to 13.

An official at the embassy said he did not know anything about the report that Kim Jong-Il's son was aboard the flight, but North Koreans sporting lapel badges of former ruler Kim Il-Sung were spotted waiting at Beijing airport.

Blair talks tough against migrants

AP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair vowed yesterday to take a tougher stance with asylum-seekers, trying to boost his credentials a month before an expected election on an issue that traditionally belongs to his political opponents.

Blair, writing in The Times, said the United Nations' 1951 convention protecting refugees needed to be updated.

"Its values are timeless, but we should stand back and consider its application in today's world," he wrote.

"This includes improving the ways in which genuine refugees can be helped," he continued. "But it also means ensuring that those who are not entitled to benefit from the 1951 convention are dealt with swiftly, through quick decisions and

an effective system for returns. This must be a priority should be win the next election."

Asylum has been a high-profile, emotional issue in Britain and other European countries, with the opposition Conservatives accusing Blair's Labour party of being too lenient on those seeking refuge.

The prime minister is widely expected to call national elections for June 7.

The 1951 Convention on Refugees was signed by 137 countries, including Britain, as a response to the massive displacements that followed World War II. Participating nations agreed to respect refugees' human rights and grant at least temporary asylum to those who had reason to fear persecution at home.

China accuses US of seeking confrontation

AFP, Beijing

A Chinese official newspaper yesterday accused the United States of seeking military confrontation rather than dialogue and of harking back to the Cold War era.

In a blistering commentary targeting Washington's plans for an anti-missile system, the English-language China Daily attacked US policies which it argued were aimed at global domination.

"To make way for the US missile plan, the US president did not hesitate to trample on an international treaty," it said. "Uncle Sam has more than once ignored international laws

and principles in the pursuit of its own interests."

The article also charged Washington with "pushing the world back into the Cold War era by seeking military confrontation rather than solving disputes through negotiations and dialogue."

"The US is taking a dangerous course," it said.

China's official media has kept up an unrelenting barrage of criticism against the plan unveiled by President George W. Bush for the anti-missile system and for replacing the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Moscow.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture taken off Russian NTV television shows first-ever space tourist Dennis Tito (C), Russian cosmonauts Talgat Musabayev (R) and Yuri Baturin (L) during a press conference on board the International Space Station (ISS) yesterday. Russian space officials denied they had agreed to reimburse the United States for costs related to millionaire Dennis Tito's pioneering space adventure.

US loses its seat at UN HR Commission

REUTERS, United Nations

In a stunning upset, the United States lost its seat on the top United Nations human rights body it helped found in 1948, a move that reflected frustration at US positions from its allies and foes alike.

The defeat on Thursday came during voting for three seats allocated to Western nations on the UN Human Rights Commission. France got 52 votes, Austria 41 votes, Sweden 32 votes and the United States 29 votes.

Speculation on why it happened ranged from poor lobbying and the absence of a US ambassador to American condemnation of rights abuses in China, Russia, Cuba, Sudan and elsewhere. Others blamed the action on the huge debt Washington has yet to pay the United Nations and the Bush administration's position on environment, defence and attitude towards international organizations.

The secret balloting took place in the UN Economic and Social Council in New York, the parent body of the 53-nation Geneva-based human rights commission, which assigns investigators to probe abuses around the world.

The United States as well as

Russia and India had served on the commission since its inception. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D Roosevelt, was the commission's first chair and the main author of its 1948 landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"Understandably, we are very disappointed," James Cunningham, the chief US representative, told reporters, declining to speculate on the reason for the defeat.

"We very much wanted to serve on the committee," he said.

In Washington, a State Department official, who would not be named, said "there is no question that financial questions formed an important background to this vote."

She was referring to the long dispute between Washington and the United Nations over US arrears and the level of the US contribution. The dispute has been settled in principle but Congress still has not paid its \$1.7 billion debt.

However, Joanna Weschler, the UN representative for Human Rights Watch, said the United States had voted "on the wrong side of several human rights issues in the last few years," and lost votes among its some of its allies.

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Khatami seeks reelection

AFP, Tehran

President Mohammad Khatami announced yesterday he will stand for re-election next month in a tear-filled speech warning there was still a "heavy price" to pay for democracy in Iran.

The 57-year-old reformist cleric, whose moves to liberalise Iran have been bitterly opposed by the conservative establishment, said he would have ideally preferred to serve the nation in some other capacity.

"There was talk that I doubted whether to stand, and it is true," he said in a 15-minute speech at the interior ministry after filing official papers to launch his bid for re-election when voters go to the polls June 8.

Top US military official to visit India

AFP, New Delhi

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States General Henry Shilton will visit India later this month to renew bilateral military ties, the Indian Express newspaper said yesterday.

Shilton's visit signalled Washington's willingness to restore military ties snapped in the aftermath of New Delhi's shock nuclear tests in May 1998, the daily said.

"The understanding is that Shilton would be coming to work on a closer relationship between the two nations' military forces in a move towards the normalisation of military contacts," it said.

The Indian Express added said this was the first "official signal" that Washington recognised India as a nuclear power and wanted to lift sanctions to clear the way for weapons purchases and cooperation on nuclear energy.

Zambian MPs move to impeach president

AFP, Lusaka

Zambian parliamentarians have filed a motion to impeach President Frederick Chiluba in the wake of his unconstitutional bid to run for a third term, a parliamentary statement said Friday.

Chiluba, who came to power a decade ago supporting a constitutional amendment that imposed a two-term limit, was expected to address the nation late Friday, a state house spokesman announced.

The impeachment notice was filed by former local government minister Ackson Sejani, who was recently sacked from Chiluba's cabinet for opposing the president's bid.

So far, more than a third of parliamentarians -- 65 out of 158 -- have signed the petition filed Thursday to the speaker of the national assembly.