



PHOTO: AFP
Indonesian children play around in a flooded street in South Jakarta on Wednesday. Landslide and floods following several days of heavy rain have killed at least 19 people in Indonesia and submerged thousands of homes.

Floods swamp Jakarta

19 killed across Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Heavy rain that has caused 19 deaths in Indonesia flooded huge areas of the capital Jakarta Wednesday, forcing at least 30,000 people to flee their homes, closing some 20 schools and disrupting road and air traffic.

The rain, which has fallen since Saturday, caused at least 12 deaths in the capital of some eight million people. The other deaths reported by police or local media included five on the resort island of Bali and two elsewhere.

Between 15 to 20 per cent of Jakarta was under water on Wednesday afternoon, according to city's flood control agency.

At least 30,000 people had fled or been rescued from their homes and were staying in schools, mosques and neighbourhood offices.

Officials said the muddy brown water was up to two meters (6.6 feet) deep in some places. The state disaster control agency has provided five rubber rafts and 100 tonnes of rice.

The flooding caused massive traffic jams on the main road to Sukarno-Hatta international airport and other highways.

"The airport highway is still passable by cars or buses but if things worsen, there is a chance of closure," a police officer in West Jakarta said. Airport officials said several flights were delayed because travellers were stuck in jams.

Commuters living in the suburbs had to skip work. Environment Minister Nabiel Makarim, who toured flooded areas by helicopter, urged people in unaffected areas to stay home so as not to worsen the jams.

Environmentalists blamed the floods on years of bad city planning and corruption that had allowed green areas to be built on, causing more rain to run into the city's numerous rivers rather than soak into the soil.

Rubbish-clogged or broken drains also play a part.

Two factory workers in the Cimanggis area of East Jakarta were killed on Wednesday when a wall collapsed on their dormitory unit, police said.

On Tuesday six people were killed when a landslide triggered by the heavy rain struck their homes in southern Jakarta before dawn while they were sleeping.

Four others died from separate flood-related incidents in Tangerang, a satellite city just west of Jakarta, the daily Koran Tempo said Wednesday. Marines used motorised rafts to rescue women and children from the area.

On Bali, five people were killed by floods and landslides in Buleleng district on the north coast on Tuesday, said district police chief M. Syafie. Two others were missing.

A woman was found dead in a field Wednesday near the East Java town of Situbondo after being swept away by mudslides, police said. A man was missing.



PHOTO: AFP
A one-day-old baby giraffe is caressed by her mother Etosha at Budapest's zoo on Tuesday. A name-giving competition is being held to name the baby giraffe and the name of the winner will be announced on February 15.

Palestinian suicide bomber hits again

AFP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up early Wednesday near a van transporting two members of the Israeli security service, severely injuring the men, in an Arab village north of Tel Aviv, army radio said.

The security agents, said by public radio to be members of the internal Shin Beth service, were rushed to hospital in nearby Kfar Saba.

The blast occurred under a bridge in the Arab town of Taibeh, 20 km north of Tel Aviv, and close to the autonomous West Bank Palestinian town of Tulkarem, the report said.

Indian troops kill 8 'Pak infiltrators'

REUTERS, Jammu

Indian forces killed eight Muslim separatists in contested Kashmir overnight, among them five men sneaking across the border from Pakistan, a defence official said on Wednesday.

The clashes came as Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fire along the frontier of the rebellion-racked Himalayan region.

The five were killed early Wednesday as they tried to cross the heavily defended border among the forests of Rajouri district, about 175 km north of Jammu, the winter capital of India's Jammu and Kashmir state.

No survivors found in Ecuadoran plane crash

AFP, Cumbal

No survivors were found in the wreckage of an Ecuadoran jetliner carrying 92 people that smashed into a snow-capped volcano in southern Colombia, rescuers and local officials said Tuesday.

The wreckage of the Boeing 727-100 belonging to Ecuador's state-run TAME airlines was discovered spread over a wide area near the top of the 4,700 meter (15,000 feet) Cumba volcano in Colombia, just north of the border with Ecuador.

"Search teams found the wreckage, but there were no survivors," said Colonel Henry Salcedo of the Colombian army which helped coordinate rescue efforts.

Salcedo, based with a military unit in southern Colombia, told a Bogota radio station that the wreckage of the jetliner was found in the Andes Mountains some 20 km from the border with Ecuador.

Maoists bomb Coca-Cola plant in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels bombed a Coca-Cola plant in Nepal but caused little damage, two months after a similar attack on the US beverage giant's only other factory in the Himalayan kingdom, officials said Wednesday.

S. B. Gurung, the manager of the plant in Bharatpur, 180 km south of Kathmandu, said the Maoists cut down barbed wire late Tuesday above the factory's tall brick wall and planted powerful bombs.

But he said the explosion did not cause extensive damage and will not affect Coca-Cola's operations in Nepal.

"The production will resume from Thursday normally," Gurung told AFP.

He said Coca Cola, based in Atlanta, and the insurance company were assessing the damage.

Vajpayee says no to pullback

Pakistan still committed to talks

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ruled out Wednesday pulling back troops from the border with Pakistan, saying Islamabad had yet to fulfill its pledge to shut down Islamic extremist groups.

"There is no such proposal (to pull back troops) at this juncture," Vajpayee was quoted by the Press Trust of India (PTI) as saying during the inauguration of an exhibition in New Delhi.

"We hope there will soon be uniformity in its (Pakistan's) words and deeds," Vajpayee added.

The two nuclear rivals have come to the brink of their fourth war since New Delhi accused Pakistan-based Islamic militants of carrying out an attack on its parliament on December 13.

In a landmark speech earlier this month, Musharraf launched a crackdown on Islamic extremism and outlawed five radical groups, including two blamed by India for the parliament attack. Since then 2,000 alleged militants have been arrested.

But New Delhi has refused to enter into talks with Islamabad, insisting further visible steps should be taken to eliminate "terrorism" before dialogue can begin.

Last week, Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani had said it would take about two months for the government to ascertain whether Pakistan had stopped the infiltration of Islamic militants into Indian Kashmir.

Japanese PM sacks FM

AFP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi defended Wednesday his shock decision to sack foreign minister Makiko Tanaka over an argument that threatened to scupper debate over Japan's supplementary budget.

"I decided to take the action because an issue that should have been resolved within the foreign ministry grew into a problem that affected the entire government," Koizumi said.

"The problem then entangled parliamentary proceedings. So I made the decision," he told an upper house budget committee. "I was correcting what was abnormal."

Koizumi appointed himself acting foreign minister until a successor is found.

The government hoped to decide on a new foreign minister this week, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda told a news conference.

With Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov due to arrive here Friday and US President George W. Bush visiting from February 17, Japan urgently needs to fill the vacuum at the foreign ministry.

The planned visit by Ivanov could be rescheduled as a result of Tanaka's sacking, Jiji Press news agency said, quoting a foreign ministry source.

The government's top spokesman, known as an arch-rival of Tanaka because of a feud carried over from their respective late fathers, drew laughter from reporters when he told a news conference with a smile: "In a word, we want to choose a 'good' minister."

"Looking back, I think she was a remarkable foreign minister as she demonstrated her personal character and came up with ideas we could not even think of," he added ambiguously.

Officials at the prime minister's office declined to comment on possible candidates to succeed Tanaka, but media reports suggested Koizumi wanted to pick Sadako Ogata, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Ogata won wide acclaim from the Japanese media for her accomplished co-chairing of the international donors conference on Afghanistan in Tokyo last week, overshadowing Tanaka, who was sidelined even though it was a ministerial meeting.

US accused of practising state terrorism

Iran rejects Bush's charges

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq, singled out by Washington as part of an "axis of evil", on Wednesday accused US President George W. Bush of practising state terrorism.

"The United States is the only country in the world, along with the Zionist entity, to practise state terrorism against peoples and governments that do not surrender to US wishes, under the pretext of fighting the sources of terrorism," said Salem al-Qubaissi, head of the parliamentary commission on Arab and international relations.

"This speech clearly shows that US policy is hostile to Arabs and Muslims," Qubaissi told AFP.

Bush on Tuesday singled out Iran, Iraq and North Korea as "an axis of evil," bluntly warning the three nations that they could soon become targets in the US-led war on terrorism.

Delivering his first State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress, Bush put the three so-called rogue states on notice that the United States was prepared to act, alone if it has to, against them should they threaten their people, their neighbours or others.

Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi on Wednesday vehemently rejected US President George W. Bush's charges that Tehran is involved in international terrorism.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the accusations of Mr Bush to be an interference in its internal affairs," Kharazi said, according to the official state news agency IRNA.

"We condemn the American accusations and think the world no longer accepts hegemony. We think Mr Bush would do better by providing proof of his allegations."

"He should know that the repetition of such accusations is not going to help him," Kharazi said.

"With these arrogant remarks, the American government unmasks its true face and proves its desire to spread its hegemony through the entire world."

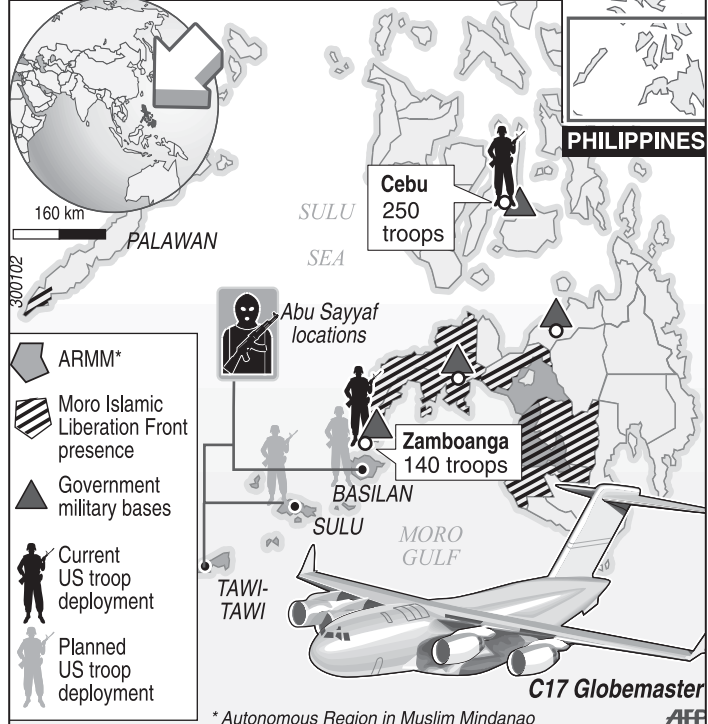
"Bush's objective is to divert public opinion from events in the Middle East and to prepare American public opinion for continued American support for Israel in its repression of the Palestinian people," Kharazi said.

In his State of the Union address to Congress on Tuesday night, Bush singled out Iran, Iraq and North Korea as "an axis of evil," bluntly warning they could soon become targets in the US-led war on terrorism.

"By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger," Bush said. "They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred."

US military in the Philippines

More than 600 US troops are expected to bolster government forces



US to open Philippine front in war on terror

AFP, Zamboanga

US troops open a new front in the war on terrorism here on Thursday with the launch of a six-month operation designed to bolster the Philippine military in its fight against Muslim guerillas linked to al-Qaida.

Around 140 American troops, a vanguard for a force that will eventually number more than 600, were already in Zamboanga, US officials said.

The southern city is the Philippine military's main base for operations against the Abu Sayyaf, a shadowy group notorious for a spate of kidnappings which both Manila and Washington have linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network. The group's current hostages include a pair of US missionaries.

"Every American soldier that is here is a volunteer and they're excited about the opportunity to help our long-term allies, the Philippines," the overall commander of the US contingent, Brigadier General Donald Wurster, said.

"We're looking forward with our counterparts to do something worthwhile."

A US C-17 transport plane on Thursday delivered more troops, weapons and equipment to the city. US transporters have been flying in on an almost daily basis for the past two weeks.

But despite the logistics build-up, US military spokeswoman Major Cynthia Teramae said joint field operations against the Abu Sayyaf in the jungles of nearby Basilan island were still some distance away.

Initial cooperation would focus on training, with the development of nighttime operating capabilities a key goal.

"My understanding is the Armed Forces of the Philippines does not have the capability to fight at night," she said. "If we are able to share the opportunity to include flying helicopters at night, that would give you the upper hand."

The importance Washington attaches to the operation was underlined by US President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address.

"While the most visible military action is in Afghanistan, America is acting elsewhere," he said.

"We now have troops in the Philippines helping to train that country's armed forces to go after terrorist cells that have executed an American and still hold hostages."

The deployment has provoked opposition within the Philippines however and the operations are only going ahead after a one-day delay caused by negotiations on the terms of the US forces mission.

And Filipino military spokesman Brigadier General Edilberto Adan said that communist guerrilla leaders had made threats to disrupt the operations.

"We shall be prepared to meet them," he warned, while stressing that communist guerrillas are not known to operate in these parts.

Lanka favours absorbing LTTE rebels into army

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's top army general today called for integrating Tamil Tiger guerillas into the armed forces if Norwegian-backed peace efforts succeed.

Lieutenant General Lionel Balagalle said the military should start considering how it could absorb members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) into the security forces once a final settlement to the separatist conflict is reached.

"We must start addressing this problem before we are confronted with it," Balagalle said at a UNICEF-sponsored workshop to train military officers on the treatment of LTTE child combatants in military custody.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan military officers Wednesday began a UN-sponsored training program on how to deal with captured child soldiers fighting in the ranks of Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

Jean-Luc Bories, an official with the UN children's agency UNICEF, said the week-long training session was part of an advocacy program aimed at improving the conditions of children caught up in the conflict.

Bories said they were constantly raising the issue of child combatants with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while also trying to ensure that those in custody were protected.

VHP to mobilise 1m to begin Ram Temple construction

AP, New Delhi

Hard-line Hindu nationalists on Tuesday ruled out talks with the government and said they would mobilise one million people to begin the construction of a temple on the site of a razed 16th century mosque.

"There is no question of postponement of the March 12 deadline. Our decision is final," Press Trust of India quoted Pravin Togadia, secretary-general of the World Hindu Council, as saying in the Indian capital.

The council is leading the campaign to build a huge temple to the Hindus' most revered deity Rama in Ayodhya, 550 km east of New Delhi.

In 1992, Hindu extremists tore down the 16th century Babri mosque in Ayodhya with spades, crowbars and their bare hands, triggering fierce clashes between Hindus and Muslims that killed 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, across India.

Millions of Hindus revere Ayodhya as the birthplace of Rama and claim a Hindu temple was destroyed centuries ago to build the mosque. A small, makeshift, Hindu temple built on the site soon after the mosque was torn down is protected by hundreds of police.

The Hindu-Muslim dispute is expected to be a key issue in provincial elections next month in India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located.

On Tuesday, Togadia rejected Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's suggestion that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or the World Hindu Council, wait for a court decision on the volatile issue.