

Iran lowers toll, aid pledges pour in

AFP, Tehran

Condolences and offers of help flooded in Sunday as Iran cleared up the damage caused by the earthquake in the northwest of the country, but said the death toll was not as heavy as first feared.

The interior ministry sharply revised down the toll from Saturday's quake to 230, against an earlier official toll of 500, in a statement quoted by state television.

"The earthquake caused 227 deaths in the Qazvin region and three in Hamedan, and around 1,000 injured in total," state television quoted a ministry statement as saying.

However the official news agency IRNA, quoting local officials, said later that five people had been killed in Zanjan province northwest of Qazvin, where heavy damage had been caused to 126 villages around Khodabandeh.

The quake, registering 6.0 on the Richter scale, struck the country early Saturday, devastating scores of towns and villages, including the city of Bouynzahra at its epicentre in Qazvin province, and leaving thousands homeless.

It shook eight provinces, including the capital Tehran.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian men search for bodies in the village of Changireh, 120 km from Qazvin city in the northwestern Qazvin province, which was completely destroyed by a powerful earthquake that hit northern and western Iran on Saturday. Forty bodies have been recovered in the village. The earthquake measuring 6.0 on the open-ended Richter scale hit the city of Bouynzahra and was followed by 21 aftershocks, three of which exceeded 4.0 degrees in intensity. Iran's state media lowered the earthquake death toll to 230 from over 500.

200 feared dead in Russian floods

AFP, Moscow

More than 200 Russian were feared dead Sunday as a result of flash floods that engulfed war-torn Chechnya and neighbouring regions of the North Caucasus, driving over 75,000 people from their homes, the interior ministry said.

The official death toll rose Sunday along with floodwater in the wake of torrential rain that destroyed houses, roads, bridges and claimed the lives of at least 46 people, the emergency ministry said.

However, reports that 180 people were missing, presumed dead, in the Stavropol territory bordering Chechnya sparked fears that the authorities' failure to respond quickly to unseasonal storms hitting the region Thursday had caused a major tragedy.

Police had yet to identify 12 of the bodies that had been discovered in the Stavropol region, most of them in the foothills of the mountainous Yessentuky area, 200 kilometres (120 miles) from the Chechen border, deputy police chief Colonel Andrei Aleksa said.

War was a 'touch and go' affair: Vajpayee

AFP, Washington

India and Pakistan came close to war as tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbours and rivals escalated over the past several months, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said.

"It was a touch-and-go affair," Vajpayee told the US newsweekly Newsweek in an interview released Saturday.

"I did not rule out the possibility of war. Until the last minute we were hoping that wiser counsels would prevail."

The two South Asian nations found themselves on the brink of war following an attack on the Indian parliament in December allegedly by Pakistan-based gunmen active in Kashmir's decade-old separatist insurgency.

Between them, the two nations have one million troops massed along their common border.

Already-simmering tensions nearly boiled over in mid-May when three militants struck at a bus and an

army camp in Indian Kashmir, killing 32 soldiers and their families before they themselves were gunned down.

Tensions grew further between the two Saturday after Pakistan claimed -- and India denied -- Indian troops had tortured and killed an unarmed Pakistani soldier.

Vajpayee said Pakistan has not changed in its policy over cross-border infiltration into India-controlled Kashmir, despite its promises to do so. He said 50 to 70 terrorist-training camps still exist in Pakistani-occupied Kashmir and in Pakistan.

For his part, Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf told Newsweek Pakistan may boost its military capabilities, citing increases by India in defence spending.

Asked if Pakistan planned to build up its conventional defences, Musharraf answered: "Our army is enough for deterrence at the moment. But the Indians are increasing their defence budget,

having contracted billions of dollars of purchases from Russia and the West.

"If they tilt the conventional balance, we shall have to restore it." US intervention may be the only way the conflict-ridden neighbors can settle their differences, he said.

"I think the US is the only country which can persuade India to initiate a dialogue and move towards a solution of Kashmir. Bilateralism hasn't worked," Musharraf said.

Musharraf had earlier said his troops would "teach India a lesson" if they invaded his country and that he "couldn't care less" about New Delhi's recent moves to scale down the threat of war.

Asked whether he viewed Musharraf as trustworthy, Vajpayee said India was "prepared to deal with him as he is," but added it was "cautious at this time."

"Our past experience is not very encouraging," he said.

Tensions as high as ever

Musharraf pledges to fight terror

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military warned on Sunday that tensions with nuclear rival India were as high as ever following the alleged torture and shooting of one of its unarmed soldiers.

Military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi said recent progress in de-escalating tensions between the two nuclear rivals had been eroded because of the death and said India risked being blamed for a "state-sponsored" killing if it did not punish those involved.

"Whatever cosmetic actions the Indians have taken have not reduced tensions at all," Qureshi told AFP, referring to recent diplomatic and military manoeuvres by India aimed at easing the crisis.

"This just goes to show tensions are exactly what they were a month back or a few months back."

"There is no decrease in tension at all."

Qureshi said he had heard no official response from India after calling for an inquiry into the death of Lance Corporal Naik Maqsood, who he said was tied up, interrogated "by third degree methods" and shot after being dragged from the no man's land between the two countries.

"They need to take action, otherwise it will be state-sponsored," Qureshi said.

"If the government is not involved the government needs to take action against the perpetrators of this."

"It's something we will not forget. It's something that needs to be investigated and if they say they are fair and open they need to investigate it and get to the bottom of it."

India has denied any torture and said Maqsood was shot while trying to cross into India. Pakistan said the ranger was captured by a group of Indian soldiers after rounding up a pair of runaway camels.

Qureshi said the incident had created dangerous "bitterness" among Pakistani ranks, which could prove extremely dangerous with a million troops from both sides massed on their international border and the Kashmir

Line of Control.

The world had heaved a collective sigh of relief in recent weeks after top-level international diplomatic pressure appeared to have brought about a climb-down.

India withdrew its navy from waters off Pakistan, reopened its airspace to Pakistani flights, announced it is appointing a new ambassador and granted leave to soldiers stationed on the borders.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, reflecting after the worst of the crisis appeared to be over, told an American news magazine it had been "touch and go" whether the two countries would go to war.

"I did not rule out the possibility of war. Until the last minute we were hoping that wiser counsels would prevail," Vajpayee told Newsweek in an interview released on Saturday.

But Pakistan has repeatedly warned just a small spark could ignite a large-scale conflict.

Meanwhile, tensions between India and Pakistan over disputed Kashmir remain high even as Pakistan works to end terrorist activity within its border, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview aired Saturday.

Musharraf told the British Broadcasting Corp. that tensions between India and Pakistan will remain "explosive" as long as large numbers of troops are deployed on the Line of Control separating the Pakistani- and Indian-controlled parts of Kashmir, a Himalayan region both claim in its entirety and have fought two wars over.

He also said his country would not back down from a fight.

"We don't see de-escalation as a response" to a recent cooling of the crisis following intense diplomatic efforts, Musharraf said.

"We couldn't care less if they (India) de-escalate or not. We are totally prepared for them, and we will teach them a lesson if they come across the Line of Control."

VHP vows to build temple, rebukes BJP for advice

AFP, Haridwar

A radical Hindu group in India on Sunday brushed off advice from the ruling BJP party to wait for a court ruling on a controversial plan to build a temple near the site of a razed mosque.

Praveen Togadia, the general secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), said he did not need advice from political parties including the BJP, which has ideological links with the Hindu group.

"The VHP is meeting here to express the sentiments of millions of Hindus. We are not concerned by the stand of political parties," Togadia said in the northern Indian holy town of Haridwar.

He also ruled out talks with Muslim religious leaders on the temple construction plan.

The VHP and other Hindu

hardliners want to build a temple on the ruins of the 16th-century Babri mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya, which was demolished by Hindu zealots in December 1992, sparking communal riots in which more than 2,000 people were killed.

Hindus claim the Babri mosque was built over the birthplace of their god Ram.

The dispute over the site of the ruined mosque is now in the hands of the courts and on Saturday BJP spokesman Vijay Kumar Malhotra said the party favoured "resolving the dispute through court verdict or consensus among parties involved in the dispute."

Hindu groups had set a March 12 deadline for the federal government, which controls the land around the razed mosque, to clear obstacles for

the construction of the temple.

After intense lobbying by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, the activists agreed to a scaled-down ceremony on March 15.

The VHP this month held another ceremony as a precursor to the temple's construction.

VHP general secretary Togadia said on Saturday the group would launch an all-India campaign to gather support for the temple's construction.

"The construction of Ram temple is non-negotiable. It is a matter of faith for 900 million Hindus worldwide," he said.

In a resolution on Saturday, the VHP expressed its anger at the BJP-led federal coalition for "its unpardonable suppression of the March 15 programme and for not taking a just position on the issue."

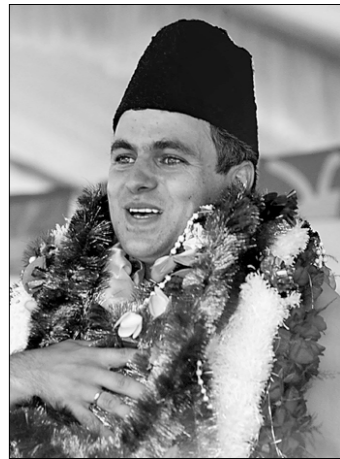


PHOTO: AFP

Omar Abdullah, the son of Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah, smiles after receiving garland at a ceremony which chose him as the party's next leader on Sunday in Srinagar.

Omar to lead Kashmir's ruling party

AFP, Srinagar

Omar Abdullah, a rising star of the Indian government, took over Sunday from his father Farooq Abdullah as leader of Kashmir's ruling party.

The high-profile politician, who is junior foreign minister in the federal government, was the only candidate for the leadership of the National Conference (NC) party, a pro-India party that has ruled Kashmir for most of the past 50 years.

Wildfire roars in Arizona

AFP, Los Angeles

A roaring wildfire that has consumed 60,000 hectares (150,000 acres) in the US state of Arizona was Saturday threatening to merge with another blaze to form a monster inferno, officials said.

"It's still burning ferociously and looks as if it will join up with the other fire in the near future," said US Forest Service official Linda Martin.

Plumes of flames and smoke shot high into the air and headed towards another fire that is covering 10,000 hectares to the west.

"It will truly be a huge fire if and when the two join up," Martin said.

The so-called Rodeo fire began Wednesday and has already blackened 60,000 hectares of bone dry forestland -- including more than 12,000 hectares on Friday alone -- and destroyed 35 structures including 15 homes.

Israel gets tough on bombers

Tel Aviv calls up reservists

AFP, REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel considered Sunday expelling the families of suicide bombers and other tough measures to crack down on attacks as its army expanded its West Bank operations after seizing control of most major towns.

The army rolled into a village near the northern West Bank town of Jenin, triggering clashes that left a Palestinian policeman dead and four local residents wounded, Palestinian security sources said.

As the Israelis maintained their grip on six of the eight principal West Bank towns, military officials began calling up the first 2,000 reservists mobilised to beef up the army as it geared for a long-haul operation.

But the defence ministry categorically denied reports it was planning to re-establish military government on the West Bank as was the case before the Palestinian Authority was created in 1994.

Israel sharply stepped up its operations after a series of suicide bombings and attacks since Tuesday that left 31 Israelis dead.

The government has vowed to seize and hold Palestinian lands until the assaults on its civilians stop.

On Sunday, the regular weekly meeting of the Israeli cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon debated additional tough measures.

"The security situation is at the centre of the discussions of the cabinet which is holding its weekly meeting Sunday in Jerusalem" a cabinet spokesman told AFP.

The Israeli media said the government would consider moves to expel family members of Palestinian suicide bombers and leaders of militant groups from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip, which is more tightly sealed off from Israel.

The destruction of the homes of suicide bombers would also be discussed, media reports said on Sunday. The measures were first evoked on Friday at a meeting of Sharon's security cabinet.

Also on the agenda was Israel's move to start building a controversial security barrier along the "green line" between Israel and the West Bank to keep would-be suicide

bombers bottled up.

Right-wing Israelis fear the barrier will isolate Jewish settlers and set in place the de facto border of a future Palestinian state. Regional Cooperation Minister Roni Milo has also said the money could better be used elsewhere.

Milo told Israeli public radio Saturday the Jewish state should instead boost its investment in the existing fence around the Gaza Strip and use electronic technology to prevent Palestinian attackers from entering Israel.

In the West Bank, Israel was in partial or total control of the towns of Bethlehem, Jenin, Ramallah, Nablus, Tulkarem and Qalqilya. Only Hebron and Jericho were spared.

In the latest military action, Israeli troops backed by 10 tanks entered the northern West Bank village of Al-Yamun west of Jenin, Palestinian security sources said.

They said Iyad Sammudi, a 28-year-old Palestinian policeman, was killed when the Israelis began shooting. Four other people were wounded and the army took two of

them to an undisclosed location.

Israeli troops conducted house-to-house searches for militants in Jenin, a bastion of Palestinian radicals and the scene of fierce fighting in April in the local refugee camp. There were no immediate reports of arrests.

Three Palestinians were wounded when Israeli troops fired on their car near the Nezarim Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian security source said. Israeli officials said only one was wounded and all three arrested.

Meanwhile, Israeli armour has rumbled into another Palestinian city and the army says it is calling up a brigade of reservists as part of what it describes as a "war against terrorism."

Palestinian witnesses said about 60 Israeli vehicles, including tanks and armoured personnel carriers, pushed into Qalqilya in the West Bank before sunrise on Sunday and took over several buildings. No resistance was reported.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli tank, armoured personnel carrier (APC) and jeep patrol the streets of the West Bank town of Nablus for the second consecutive day on Saturday. Israel's reoccupation of West Bank cities, codenamed "Determined Path", showed signs of becoming a long-term operation, drawing harsh condemnation from the Palestinian leadership.

60 Maoists killed in Nepal in clashes

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 60 Maoists were killed in two days of clashes with security forces around Nepal, a defence ministry spokesman said Saturday.

Fifty Maoists were killed in an exchange of fire between the army and the insurgents on Thursday night in Rukhum district, 390 kilometres (240 miles) west of Kathmandu, spokesman Bhubendra Paudel said.

"Following the armed clashes, the army security personnel have intensified the search for the Maoist terrorists," Paudel said in a statement.

"The blood stains on the corn plants and blood pools at different places gives the impression that at least 50 Maoist terrorists have been killed Thursday night," Paudel said.

"The dead bodies of the terrorists had been carried away by the Maoists themselves to conceal their identities," he said.

Ammunition, rifles and parts of bombs were recovered from the scenes of the clashes, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf (R) administers oath of the office of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs to Inamul Haq during a oath taking ceremony in Islamabad on Saturday. Musharraf appointed top diplomat Haq as his deputy foreign minister. Haq, a career diplomat who was earlier tipped to take the top job at the foreign ministry, has occupied several key positions for Pakistan including special representative to the United Nations.

Al-Qaida asks US to 'fasten seat belt'

AFP, Doha

A spokesman for the al-Qaida network emerged on television Sunday to announce that chief terror suspect Osama bin Laden and his cohorts were alive and well and warn the United States to "fasten its seat belt" in preparation for more attacks.

"Osama bin Laden, (his right-hand man and head of the Egyptian branch of Al-Jihad) Ayman Zawahri and (fugitive Afghan Taliban leader) Mullah (Mohammad) Omar are in good health, contrary to rumors that they were injured in Tora Bora," said Suleiman Abu Ghaita.

"Ninety-eight percent of al-Qaida leaders escaped unhurt and are running their affairs unaffected" by US bombing raids in Afghanistan, Abu Ghaita said in a lengthy statement aired on the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera satellite channel.

Abu Ghaita referred to "the eight months that have passed" since the United States launched its military campaign in Afghanistan in October, indicating his statement was recorded in June.

"The whole world and the friends of the Mujahedin (Islamic fighters) in the Muslim world will soon have the pleasure of seeing bin Laden on television," added Abu Ghaita, who was stripped of his Kuwaiti citizenship because of his alleged links to the September 11 attacks blamed on al-Qaeda.

The al-Qaida spokesman also threatened "new attacks against American targets."

"America must prepare itself and fasten its seat belt. We will arrive from where they (the Americans) are not expecting," he warned.

"Yes, we will undertake attacks, but at the right time, in the place we choose and in the manner we want."

"Neither (US Vice President) Dick Cheney nor Defense Secretary (Donald Rumsfeld) nor their president (George W. Bush) will be able to know the

place, the time or the manner in which these attacks will be carried out," he said.

"The war against the United States has just started," and al-Qaida has the means to "stage fresh attacks against US targets," Abu Ghaita said.

"So long as America persists in its unjust policy toward Muslims, we will go on hitting it everywhere ... and we have the means to carry out our threats," he said.

"Our military, security, economic and media capabilities are intact ... Our military and security apparatus is watching over new US targets. Muslims will rejoice," Abu Ghaita said.

Abu Ghaita also claimed responsibility for the April 11 explosion of a fuel tanker near a synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba which killed 19 people, including 14 German tourists, and threatened attacks against "Jewish targets."

"We will not desist from striking at America everywhere ... The whole world will see these are not just threats. The coming days and months will prove to the world the credibility of what we are saying."

"Our (would-be) martyrs are bracing to carry out these operations against US and Jewish targets," he said without elaborating.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation warned Friday that similar attacks to Djerba might be made "against US interests in the United States or overseas, notably against Jewish schools and synagogues."

The Djerba operation "was undertaken by a young man from the al-Qaida organisation who couldn't bear to see his brothers in Palestine being killed while Jews walk around enjoying themselves and freely carrying out their rituals," Abu Ghaita said.

The US military campaign in Afghanistan, launched after the then ruling Taliban militia refused to hand over the Saudi-born bin Laden to Washington, failed to track down the al-Qaida leader.