

Floods worsen across Asia

Hundreds of thousands marooned

REUTERS, New Delhi

Nearly two dozen people were killed and thousands left homeless as torrential monsoon rains lashed large parts of Asia over the weekend, worsening floods and triggering fresh storms and landslides.

The densely populated regions of eastern India and neighboring Bangladesh were worst affected, with the homes of some 300,000 flooded in India and half a million people marooned in Bangladesh, officials said on Sunday.

Two people were killed as they tried to cross an overflowing river in the eastern Indian state of Bihar. Four, including two children, died in Bangladesh.

Girish Shankar, Bihar's Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, said that, with heavy rains forecast for the next two days, the situation was expected to worsen.

He said authorities were rushing food packets and other relief materials to the flood-hit regions and arrangements were being made to move people to relief camps.

In Assam, another eastern Indian state, officials said some 100,000 people had been affected by the floods of whom an estimated 50,000 had fled their homes to safety.

Officials in Bangladesh said they were bracing for a major

disaster in the next two weeks due to heavy rain and floodwaters sweeping down the rivers from India.

"Vast areas have already gone under water, partly due to the rain and partly by floodwater coming from Assam and Meghalaya states in India," a Bangladeshi official said.

Floods are a regular feature here during the monsoon season when rains swell the mighty Ganges and Brahmaputra and their tributaries that flow from the Himalayas into India and on through Bangladesh before reaching the Bay of Bengal.

Monsoon rains cover the entire south Asian region between June and September. They are crucial for India's farm output, accounting for nearly 80 percent of total annual rainfall.

Agriculture officials in Bangladesh said the latest floods had inundated at least 100,000 hectares (250,000 acres) of rice fields around the country but they had no estimate of losses.

Floods in 1998 killed more than 3,500 people in Bangladesh and destroyed over two million tonnes of rice in the fields.

Elsewhere in South-East Asia, the Philippines counted the highest casualty toll as it was battered by heavy rains intensified by two typhoons. At least 10 people were killed, including three South Korean tourists who drowned after their boat capsized in stormy seas.

Two other Koreans were missing, officials said, as a wide

area of the main island of Luzon, including Manila, was caught in a heavy downpour triggered by Typhoon Rammasun and worsened by a second typhoon called Chata'an.

Seven people had been killed separately in landslides or by drowning since the height of the rains on Saturday when more than 4,000 fled their homes, the Philippines civil defense office said on Sunday.

The South Koreans were part of a group of 23, who had come from the Puerto Galera tourist resort and were sailing toward Batangas when heavy seas overturned their boat.

Floods subsided in many parts of Manila on Sunday but a weather bureau spokesman said monsoon rains lashing the metropolis of 11 million people could continue until Tuesday.

Floods, waist-deep in places, stranded tens of thousands of commuters in Manila and forced more than 4,000 people living mostly in low-lying squatter colonies to seek shelter in school buildings and town halls, relief officials said.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo waded through shind-deep waters to visit the affected slums on Saturday.

Rammasun, which spared the Philippines, swept across the Korean peninsula on Saturday, causing four deaths.



A man paddles through the floodwaters of the Jadhah river in front of a submerged house in Samarajan area of Dhemaji district, in Assam state on Sunday. Federal troops were called in to Assam to assist the more than 750,000 people who have been stranded by floods.

Autonomy 'only solution' for Kashmir: NC

AFP, Srinagar

The ruling party in Indian Kashmir said Sunday granting autonomy to the state and opening the border which divides the region between India and Pakistan were the only way to resolve the Kashmir problem.

"The granting of autonomy and opening of borders for the people living across the two parts of Kashmir are the only sustainable solution to the dispute," said Ali Mohammad Sagar, Kashmir's works minister and senior leader of the ruling National Conference (NC) party.

"A section of the people talk of independence, while others favour accession to Pakistan but our demand is internal autonomy," he said.

The NC wants Kashmir to have complete self-rule in all areas except defence, finance and communications. The Indian state enjoyed such autonomy until 1953.

In 2000 it passed a resolution in the state legislature demanding autonomy, which was rejected by New Delhi, saying it would fuel separatist tendencies.

Militant groups active in Kashmir are also not interested in the ruling party's autonomy

demand.

There are more than a dozen rebel groups fighting for Kashmir's secession from India. They want to join it with neighbouring Pakistan or remain independent.

"Our demand (on autonomy) is genuine," said Sagar, adding that neither can India do without "this part of Kashmir, nor would Pakistan leave its acquired part of Kashmir."

Sagar said it would be in the interests of families divided by the Line of Control (LoC) -- the de facto border which divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan -- to allow them to cross over to see relatives on the other side.

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since their independence from Britain in 1947 and in recent weeks seemed perilously close to another.

The minister said the gun was not the solution to the Kashmir issue, "nor can it pave the way for lasting peace in the region."

"We never support killing of any person, be he a security personnel, party worker, civilian or a militant," he said.



King Gyanendra of Nepal (R) receives flowers from an elderly man on his 56th birthday at Narayanhiti Royal Palace in Kathmandu on Sunday. Thousands of admirers trooped to the Royal Palace to present flowers and messages of congratulations to the king in person.

Arafat challenged over sacking of security chief

AFP, Jerusalem

Yasser Arafat tried to halt a new challenge to his authority on Saturday and met with officers from his West Bank preventive security force protesting against the sacking of their strongman boss, Colonel Jibril Rajoub.

The eight officers emerged from the two-hour meeting at Arafat's battered headquarters saying they remained loyal to him, but had made it clear they wanted Rajoub appointed to another post "at least as important," one of their spokesmen, Captain Sabri Tmezi, told AFP.

"The meeting was positive. We confirmed our loyalty to Mr. Arafat, who is our symbol. His reaction (to our demands) was positive, he understands what it's about and has promised to do it," Tmezi said.

Earlier in the day, some 600 members of the West Bank force, which has been notably unsuccessful in cracking down on radical militant groups as demanded by Israel and United States, staged a protest in Beitunia village, outside Ramallah, and vowed not to work with Rajoub's appointed successor.

They demanded Arafat renounce his decision to appoint the former governor of the West Bank city of Jenin, Zuheir Manasrah, as their new chief, saying there were more qualified candidates within the force itself.

Pak polls could be postponed

IANS, Islamabad

General elections that were expected to be held in Pakistan in October are likely to be put off till March 2003, says a front-page report in The News daily.

The paper quoting unnamed sources said people in "the inner circle of President Pervez Musharraf's administration suggest elections would be put off till March 2003".

But Musharraf and senior members of his regime issue assurances almost daily that elections would be held according to schedule.

While validating the October 1999 military coup in which Musharraf came to power, the Supreme Court had directed the government to hold polls within three years and announce the election schedule 90 days before the stipulated period expired.

But till July 7, there were no indications of preparations for announcing the election schedule.

Musharraf's regime has to announce the schedule by July 12, as it is

mandatory for them to announce it 90 days prior to the general elections.

Quoting unnamed officials the paper said there were three reasons for postponing polls: "First, the finalisation of the

constitutional packages would take some time as the announcement of these proposed amendments so far only first package has been announced -- will take some time.

"Two, streamlining of the election machinery, appointment of staff and its training; and three, a suitable environment for holding elections is required so that a real democracy is introduced in the country."

It said another difficulty the government was facing was preparation of national identity cards (NIC), as the new electoral rolls will include

people with 18 years of age and above to exercise their franchise.

The Musharraf regime has lowered the voter age to 18 from 21 and this needs revision of electoral lists. The government was in the transitional phase of replacing the previous NIC with computerised ones.

"This is a gigantic task and the government has to take some time before NICs are made available to all applicants," the paper said.

It said a strong lobby in the government supports the idea of deferring

polls till March 2003, as by that time preparations, suitable environment and other necessary steps to ensure "free and

fair elections" would be taken.

But the paper said: "Some influential people do not subscribe to the idea of postponing polls even by a day and want to follow the Supreme Court judgement."

These people, it said, argue that polls postponement will result in loss of people's trust in the government and what it has been saying since long.

These people quote Musharraf, Chief Election Commissioner Irshad Hassan and others' assurances that elections will not be postponed.

The paper said: "Serious discussion seems to have kicked off in the power corridors, as now is the time to take a firm decision of either going ahead with the scheduled polls or to put them off."

If the government decides to put off the polls, it has to decide as well a mechanism of how to secure the consent or endorsement of the Supreme Court of its decision to put off the polls.

Many say the postponement, if a final decision were taken, would be seen in a different light. But if the government gives new dates for polls and some valid reasons for putting them off, its critics may feel it appropriate not to resist or protest against the decision.

\$ 10 b needed annually to fight AIDS, says UN

AFP, Barcelona

Funding to help poor and middle-income countries combat the worsening AIDS crisis needs to be at least triple, to 10 billion dollars a year, the United Nations said Sunday.

Speaking before the launch of the world's biggest-ever AIDS conference, UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot declared "the world has now awakened to the epidemic and what it takes to bring it under control."

Since the previous forum in Durban, South Africa, in 2000, funding for prevention and treatment programmes for AIDS and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in developing countries had increased six fold to around 2.8 billion dollars today, Piot said.

But he warned this was still nowhere near what was needed -- a 50 percent annual increase in the commitment for every year until 2005.

HIV "is now really getting off the ground" in China and the former

Soviet Union -- and the latest dismal figures showed that the epidemic has still not peaked in southern Africa, the worst-hit region.

"The evidence from a historical perspective is that the epidemic is still in its earliest phase," he told a press briefing.

"Ten billion dollars are necessary to have the kind of results that Uganda has had," he said.

He referred to the East African country that has braked the spread of HIV through intensive safe-sex programmes, nationwide diagnostics and also treatment with anti-retroviral drugs to prevent babies from being infected while in the womb.

Piot said there had been some "watershed" funding improvements in the last couple of years, notably the creation of the UN's Global Fund for AIDS and other major diseases and a World Bank fund that earmarked soft-loans for AIDS-ravaged countries.

Koreas trade threats after sea clash

AFP, Seoul

The two Koreas traded threats of renewed hostilities Sunday as the South's navy said that a deadly sea clash last month was "meticulously" planned by the North.

Fallout from the June 29 battle in the Yellow Sea saw the rival states exchange some of their harshest warnings in recent years.

North Korea accused the South of sending navy ships across the disputed sea frontier on Sunday in a bid to heighten tensions and warned there could be a new clash.

The North Korean navy command said two South Korean ships entered the same zone off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula where the two navies fought eight days earlier.

The provocation in the wake of the armed clash on June 29 is a deliberate move to render the situation in the waters more strained," said a navy statement quoted by the communist North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

"We warn that the infiltration of the combat warships is a dangerous act which may spark a new armed clash."

A South Korean navy spokesman rejected the claims. "Our navy activity this morning was staged well south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) and as part of our normal operations," the spokesman said.

"North Korea should stop fabricating facts and they will face strong counter-measures if they try to cross the NLL again," warned the spokesman.

South Korea has said two North Korean patrol boats crossed the unofficial frontier, which dates from the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, on June 29 and one opened fire after ignoring warnings to turn back.

The clash left four South Korean sailors dead, one missing and 19 wounded from a vessel that was sunk. According to the South, at least 30 North Koreans were killed or wounded in the fighting.

Amidst widespread anger over the deaths, the South has already changed its rules of engagement so

the navy can open fire first if necessary.

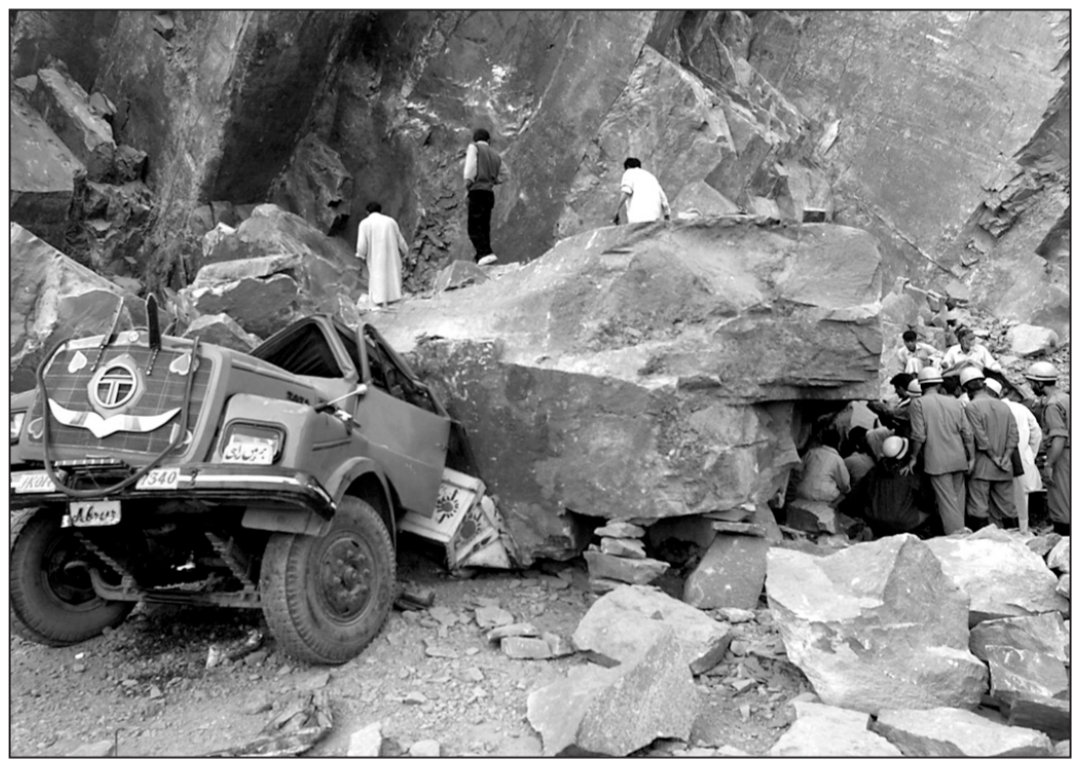
The defence ministry on Sunday released details of an inquiry, which said North Korea spent several weeks plotting the clash.

Defence ministry spokesman Hwang Eui-Don said the navy failed to react to "unusual" movements by North Korean boats which crossed the NLL several times in June with their guns aimed at South Korean vessels.

"We concluded that the North made preparations for the attack throughout June," Hwang told a press conference, describing the sea battle as "a malicious provocation plotted meticulously by North Korea."

South Korea has admitted that its navy was told not to sink the North Korean vessel for fear of escalating tensions into a wider conflict.

In response to a question whether North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il approved the hostilities, the spokesman said: "We need more analysis to see who ordered the attack."



A truck is crushed by a huge boulder that fell from a hillock at Pandhratan in Srinagar on Saturday. At least eight people were killed and several others remain unaccounted for when a huge boulder crushed three trucks.

Pop King lashes out at racism

REUTERS, New York

The self-ordained King of Pop Michael Jackson lashed out at the music industry's treatment of black artists -- including himself -- in an appearance on Saturday with New York civil rights leader Rev. Al Sharpton.

"The record companies really do conspire against the artistes," Jackson, 43, told an adoring crowd of around 350 people inside Sharpton's National Action Network headquarters in Harlem. "Especially the black artistes."

The former boy wonder of the Jackson Five said generations of black musicians have been hurt and manipulated by profit-grabbing record companies, and called attention to his own dispute with label Sony Music.

"When you fight for me, you're fighting for all black people, dead and alive," Jackson said.

Jackson has called on Sony to release music recorded in a charity effort that followed the Sept. 11 attacks. There have also been charges that Sony Music, owned by Japanese media and electronics giant Sony Corp., failed to properly promote his latest album, "Invincible," which has had disap-

pointing sales.

The dispute has won sympathy from Sharpton and lawyer Johnnie Cochran, who have started an initiative against what the two say is the exploitation of artists of all races and colors by record companies.

Jackson also targeted Sony Music Entertainment chief Tommy Mottola, calling him a racist and "devilish." He accused Mottola of using the "n-word" -- a highly derogatory racial slur -- referring to an unidentified black Sony artist.

A Sony spokesman said Jackson's comments were "ludicrous, spiteful and hurtful."

"It seems particularly bizarre that he has chosen to launch an unwarranted and ugly attack on an executive who has championed his career, and the careers of so many other superstars, for many years," he said.

Later on Saturday, a group of around 150 fans -- including a few Jackson look-alikes and one man who regaled the crowd with his Jackson-inspired "moonwalk" dance -- gathered outside Sony's midtown Manhattan offices to call for a boycott of all Sony products and the ouster of Mottola.



Reverend Al Sharpton (R) whispers in musician Michael Jackson's (L) ear during a rally at Sharpton's National Action Network headquarters in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York on Saturday. The two teamed up to address unfairness and racism in the music industry.

Delhi gives go-ahead for talks with Naga rebels

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government has given its chief negotiator a green light to continue talks with the leaders of a powerful northeastern separatist group to end decades of violence in the region, officials said Sunday.

A ceasefire between the government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), led by Isak Chishi Swu and Thunigaleng Muivah, is due to expire on July 31.

"New Delhi's chief negotiator K. Padmanabhaiah met Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Saturday to discuss the issue," an Indian home ministry official said.

Padmanabhaiah will be going to Amsterdam shortly to hold talks with Isak Chishi Swu and Thunigaleng Muivah," he said.

News reports here said Padmanabhaiah's trip to Amsterdam was aimed at extending the ceasefire.

The NSCN is a militant outfit fighting for an independent tribal homeland for the Naga tribespeople and its campaign has claimed more than 25,000 lives in India's north-east.