



A woman with her baby looks at her flooded home from an embankment at Sonapur, some 17 km from Guwahati on Saturday in Assam. Floods in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam have caused more than 600 million USD worth of damage and led to a range of epidemics that have claimed 110 lives.

Diseases haunt flood-hit S Asia

REUTERS, Guwahati

An epidemic of water-borne diseases has hit parts of South Asia, where the havoc wreaked by heavy monsoon rains left more than 600 people dead and thousands homeless.

In India's remote northeastern state of Assam alone, more than 500 people are suffering from encephalitis --which causes brain inflammation-- and other water-borne diseases.

Health Minister of Assam, Bhumidar Burman, said on Saturday that everyday, 15-20 people infected with encephalitis were being admitted to hospitals in the eastern part of the state.

"Hospitals are over crowded with patients infected by encephalitis. Mostly children have been infected by the disease," Burman told Reuters by phone.

He said at least 90 people,

including 40 children, had died from encephalitis in past two weeks in Assam. The disease has affected people in eight of the 23 districts of the state. In neighbouring Nepal, authorities said seven people died of diarrhoea in southern Nepal. "We have a problem of diarrhoea and other water-borne disease in the flood affected areas," Home (Interior) Ministry spokesman Lekh Nath Pokhel, told Reuters.

Health authorities in flood-hit Bangladesh said diarrhoea had also affected people in the central parts of the country because they were drinking contaminated water and stale food.

They said diarrhoea was hitting many flood-affected districts as tubewells, the main source of drinking water in these areas, had been submerged by flood waters.

A team of medical experts from Red Cross, Geneva, arrived in Assam with medicines and relief

material after state health officials warned of a possible outbreak of jaundice, encephalitis and gastroenteritis and sought help from international aid agencies.

Meanwhile, authorities are counting the toll of the heavy rains as the floods recede in India, Nepal and Bangladesh.

In the eastern Indian state of Bihar, Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, Girish Shankar, said residents of more than 5,700 villages had been displaced by floods and crops worth more than 720 million rupees have been destroyed.

The state has sought 10 billion rupees (\$205.5 million) in federal aid.

The death toll from the floods reached 132 in Bihar and more than 11 million people had been affected by the floods, the worst in the state in the last 50 years. A federal government team from India, including

Defense Minister George Fernandes visited Bihar on Friday to assess the damage. The team said the government was willing to release 540 million rupees for relief work.

Officials said the situation had improved in India's northern districts but the flood waters had inundated fresh areas in central parts of Bangladesh.

The floods have killed nearly 70 people across Bangladesh, including many from diseases associated with contaminated water.

Local volunteers said about 250,000 people in the Manikganj district had been affected by the floods, and some 5,000 had lost their homes. Some 150 rivers flow into Bangladesh from India before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

The floods, an annual problem for Bangladesh, were less severe this year than the worst recorded in 1988 which killed 3,500 people.

Chen calls for referendum on Taiwan's future

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian Saturday called for a referendum on the country's future, risking the wrath of rival China which claims sovereignty over the island.

The surprise statement ran in contrast to an earlier pledge that he would not push for a plebiscite on whether Taiwan should declare independence or be reunified with China during his four-year tenure.

"Taiwan's future and destiny can only be decided by the 23 million people living on the island," Chen said in a teleconference with the pro-independence overseas Taiwanese association in Tokyo.

"But how to make the decision when the time comes? The answer is what (we) have sought after -- referendum," he told the pro-independence group.

But the president stopped short of mentioning independence.

The remarks followed a recent controversial statement from Chen that Taiwan would "walk down our own road, our Taiwan road" if Beijing remained hostile to resolving cross-strait disputes.

BSF official among 6 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

An officer and soldier of India's Border Security Force (BSF), and four Islamic militants were among six people killed in two separate shootouts overnight in the restive Himalayan region of Kashmir, a BSF spokesman said. BSF commandant V.K. Prohit and his body-guard were killed when suspected Islamic rebels opened fire on a border guard patrol which raided the militants' hide-out Friday evening in the village of Malpora, in Kashmir's central Budgam district.

Two militants were also killed when the BSF retaliated, the spokesman said.

Israel sits tight in Nablus, keeps up militant hunt

AFP, Nablus

Israeli troops hunted down militants in Nablus on Saturday, a day after soldiers poured into the northern West Bank city that Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer has dubbed a "terrorist capital".

Tanks flanked the rim of Nablus's old quarter, known as the Casbah, while soldiers conducted house-to-house searches for Palestinian militants, witnesses said, adding that snipers stood with guns poised on rooftops.

Around 120 tanks, bulldozers and troop carriers swooped on the city Friday after back-to-back bomb attacks in Jerusalem this past week, including a blast at the Hebrew University that killed two Israelis and five Americans and raised the ire of the international community.

About 50 people have been detained since Israeli troops stormed in and 10 homes have had walls bulldozed by the army as it cleared pathways into the maze of the Casbah, witnesses said.

Israel launched its offensive on the battered city as it looked to punish Palestinians for the Jerusalem bombings, the first there in six weeks and the worst Palestinian strike since Israel bombed a Gaza City neighbourhood on July 22.

That air raid killed the military commander of the Islamic group Hamas and 14 others, including nine children, and provoked cries of revenge from militant groups like Hamas which claimed the Hebrew University blast.

The army and internal security service, Shin Beth, meanwhile, blamed the civilian casualties in the Gaza air strike on "gaps" in intelligence, an army spokesman said Saturday.

Israel, which drew a storm of rebuke for the operation, said it was justified in striking Hamas military chief Saleh Shehade, who topped their most wanted list.

As Israel mulled new strategies to crush the 22-month-old Intifada, it gave the green light on Friday to a controversial measure to banish two brothers of militants who had killed Israelis, from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip.

The army hopes expulsions could deter militants after its reoccupation of most West Bank cities since mid-June failed to stamp out Palestinian attacks inside Israel.

The two men appealed Friday to a military tribunal and were to take their plea to the Supreme Court if rejected. The tribunal adjourned the case until Sunday.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces had met little resistance Friday in Nablus and swiftly took the old city centre, where they found and destroyed two bomb-making factories.

The Jerusalem campus bombing was thought to have been planned out of Nablus, Israeli officials said.

"Nablus is the terrorist capital, the departure point for suicide bombers and other would-be attackers of Israel," said Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer.

Two Palestinians were killed Friday in exchanges of fire as Israeli armour sped into the old town, while a Hamas militant was slain in a raid on a nearby village.

Cong incapable of forming coalition govt: Advani

BJP meets to draw battle plan for polls

PTI, New Delhi

Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani on Saturday claimed that the Congress was incapable of forming a coalition government at the Centre and asked party cadres to maintain the best of relations with regional parties.

Proposing the 'Delhi Pledge', a guideline for party members, at the National Council meeting here, he emphasised that the BJP must adopt a strategy of coalition like the one in 1996 in which it emerged as the single largest party in Parliament.

Such a strategy would pay rich dividends and "it is not easy for the Congress" to adopt such a policy, he

said.

Stating that the Pledge has been prepared after much thought, he said Vajpayee's declaration in 1980 that BJP is a "party with a difference" had an electrifying effect.

"Our's is not just another party. It is a party with difference, like the Congress was a movement before 1947. Our's is not a party but a nationalist movement," he asserted.

Regretting that some party workers put personal agenda before that of the organisation, he said that the party would achieve success if workers at all levels did introspection.

The NDA experiment had strengthened federalism and the

government was more representative in character, both geographically and socially, than the first non-Congress government at the Centre led by Morarji Desai, which hardly had any representation from the South and the East, Advani said.

The senior BJP leader told party workers that they should not be wary of regional parties but should ensure that the party has the best of relations with such organisations.

He said what was necessary was to give a "right direction" to the relations between BJP and its allies.

Attacking the Congress, Advani suggested that the Opposition posed no threat to the NDA government.

Rumsfeld meets with generals to snub al-Qaida

AP, Washington

Top defence officials met on Friday to plot better ways to press the hunt for al-Qaida terrorists after reports Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is unhappy with the pace of the mission in Afghanistan.

Among those attending was Gen. Charles R. Holland of the US Special Operations Command, whose covert commando units have played a key role in the war on terror.

Rumsfeld spokeswoman Victoria Clarke declined to talk about new ideas Holland might have for capturing and killing top al-Qaida leaders.

Koreas open talks, differ on sea clash

REUTERS, Seoul

Rival North and South Korea opened a fresh round of talks on Saturday amid moves by communist North to improve ties with the United States and Japan and revitalise its faltering economy.

The first inter-Korean talks in four months will be closely watched in Washington and Tokyo as a barometer of North Korea's willingness to cooperate in nuclear and missile non-proliferation efforts and in reducing tension with South Korea.

Hanging over the three-day session at North Korea's Mount Kumgang resort is lingering mistrust over a naval clash on the Yellow Sea five weeks earlier that killed five South Korean sailors and an estimated 13 North Koreans.

Britain, US, UN sceptical about Iraqi invitation to arms inspector

AFP, London

Britain and the United States and also the United Nations on Friday warned Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could be bluffing by inviting the chief UN arms inspector to Baghdad for talks, but Russia called the move an important step towards resuming inspections.

"Saddam has a long history of playing games. As his track record shows, he does not deliver," said a spokesman for Britain's Foreign Office.

In Washington, a senior US State Department official, who asked not to be named, said: "How many times have they written these letters and say 'we'll do this, we'll do that'?"

A letter delivered Thursday to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Baghdad invited chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix to visit the country for talks that could lead to

the resumption of inspections, halted in December 1998.

The move came amid growing speculation that US President George W. Bush was considering military action to overthrow Saddam, accused by Washington of developing weapons of mass destruction and providing safe haven to terrorists.

Annan will consult council members on their reaction to the offer at a lunch meeting on Monday, said UN spokesman Fred Eckhard.

The Secretary General has been trying to persuade the Iraqis to readmit UN inspectors but three rounds of talks since March have failed to make any headway.

In Moscow, the Russian foreign ministry hailed the announcement as an "important step in the right direction towards resolving the crisis through political and diplomatic means", based on UN Security Council resolutions.

Russia opposes a US military strike on Baghdad, branded by Bush as part of an "axis of evil". Moscow wants the country to allow weapons inspectors to return in exchange for a lifting of crippling UN economic sanctions.

On Thursday, Moscow and Beijing called for the UN Security Council to take the lead in settling the dispute over weapons production in Iraq.

Moreover, Iraq's invitation for the chief UN weapons inspector to visit Baghdad for talks was met with extreme caution Friday by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who wants the Security Council to review the matter.

Earlier Friday, UN spokesman Fred Eckhard told reporters that Annan "welcomes" Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri's letter, but that "the procedure proposed is at variance with the one laid down by the Security Council" in 1999.

Powell pleased with support in SE Asia against terrorism

AFP, Manila

US Secretary of State Colin Powell wrapped up a tour of Southeast Asia in the Philippines on Saturday, saying he was pleased with the region's support in the fight against international terrorism.

He hailed Philippine President Gloria Arroyo for her contributions to the campaign against terror groups and said the United States would continue its "excellent cooperation," in tackling extremists including the local Abu Sayyaf Muslim kidnapping gang.

"I have found support throughout Southeast Asia for this campaign because there is not a nation in Southeast Asia which has not at one time or another, or today, been under the threat of terrorism," Powell said.



Leftist protesters stage a "die-in" demonstration against the visit of US Secretary of State Colin Powell near the US embassy in Manila on Saturday. The government earlier banned such protests, but about 100 leftists staged the rally in defiance of the ban while Powell concluded his Philippines trip on Saturday.



Indonesian Muslim women carry banners reading "Islamic Law, Yes" during a peacefully rally in the main street of Indonesia's capital city of Jakarta on Saturday.

France calls on both India, Pakistan to resume talks

AFP, Islamabad

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin arrived here from India Saturday on his South Asian peace mission and headed straight for talks with President Pervez Musharraf, officials said.

De Villepin spent overnight in New Delhi, where he called on Pakistan and India to resume dialogue and ease tensions amid a renewed international diplomatic push to end the dangerous standoff.

The French minister was driven straight from the Chaklala military

airbase to meet with Musharraf at his Army House residence, a privilege denied to his British counterpart, Jack Straw, a fortnight ago, officials said.

De Villepin was also due to hold talks with his Pakistani counterpart, Inamul Haq, and attend a reception with the French community here before leaving later Saturday.

But as the French minister was visiting India and Pakistan, the armies of the two countries exchanged heavy artillery fire across the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed Kashmir region.

US judge sets deadline for revealing detainee names

AP, Washington

The Bush administration contends that it cannot protect national security and also meet a judge's deadline to reveal names of those held in the investigation of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ruled Friday that the Justice Department has not proven the need for a blanket policy of secrecy about more than 1,000 people picked up since the jetliner attacks. She gave the government 15 days to provide the names.

The ruling "impedes one of the most important federal law enforcement investigations in history, harms our efforts to bring to justice those responsible for the heinous attacks of Sept. 11, and increases the risk of future terrorist threats to our nation," said Robert McCallum, assistant attorney general for civil rights.

He did not say whether the department would appeal the ruling.

Kessler said the government has orchestrated a broad and

secretive investigation. "Unquestionably, the public's interest in learning the identities of those arrested and detained is essential to verifying whether the government is operating within the bounds of the law," she wrote in her ruling.

The judge said there may be exceptions to the release of names: if an individual detainee objects or if the government can show that separate court orders prohibit release of information about someone held as a material witness in a terrorism investigation.

Sharif's brother to head PML-N in Oct polls

AFP, Islamabad

Shahbaz Sharif, the younger brother of exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was elected president of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) at an internal party ballot here Saturday, a party spokesman said.

"Shahbaz's name was proposed by party's chairman Raja Zafarul Haq and he was elected unopposed," the spokesman Siddiqui Farooq told AFP.

"The decision to elect Shahbaz as party president was taken in consultation with Nawaz Sharif," he said.

The former prime minister who lives in exile in Saudi Arabia was ousted in a military coup by General Pervez Musharraf in October 1999.

Shahbaz, who is also in Saudi Arabia, was chief minister of the country's populous Punjab province during his brother's 1997-99 rule.

The party retained Saranjam Khan as secretary general and Raja Zafar as chairman, Farooq said adding that all were elected unopposed.

Elections were conducted by a five-member committee headed by former foreign minister Sartaj Aziz, he said.