

Landslide buries 67 in China

REUTERS, Beijing

A massive wall of mud and rock unleashed by heavy rains slammed into villages in southwest China, burying 67 people in the second deadly landslide to strike the area this week, witnesses and state media said on Friday.

The landslide overwhelmed 10 villages in the middle of the night in Xiping county, about 120 miles south of Kunming, the Yunnan provincial capital.

At least 28 people were confirmed dead and 39 were missing with little hope they would be found alive, state media and local officials said.

The landslide struck at 4 a.m. on Wednesday as many residents slept. Others were awake, battling floods also triggered by days of heavy rain.

28 killed in bus accident in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

At least 28 people were killed and another 10 injured Friday when a bus plunged into a deep gorge in the south of Indian-administered Kashmir, police said, revising an earlier toll.

Witnesses said the 22-seater Matador bus was carrying 48 passengers.

The accident occurred in the Poonch district, some 240 kilometres (150 miles) west of Indian Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, police spokesman Subash Raina said.

Pak SC overturns blasphemy death sentence

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court has acquitted a Christian man sentenced to death for committing blasphemy by defending British author Salman Rushdie, a court official said Friday.

The Islamic country's highest court ruled Thursday that Ayub Masih, jailed since 1996, be released immediately.

The ruling overturns last year's decision by the Lahore High Court to uphold the conviction and death penalty, which was first awarded in

4 Guantanamo Bay prisoners attempt suicide

AFP, Guantanamo Bay

Four prisoners held at a US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as part of an anti-terrorism probe have tried to commit suicide, US defence officials acknowledged late Thursday.

Neither the names nor the nationalities of the four men have been revealed.

But the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said one of the detainees had attempted to slash his wrists with a plastic razor while the others tried to hang themselves using items like bed sheets and towels.

10 killed as Chinese bridge collapses

AFP, Beijing

Ten workers were killed in central China when they were thrown off a partly-built bridge which suddenly collapsed, state media said Friday.

The Wangou Bridge on the Baotianman Tourism Highway in Henan's Neixiang county was being joined in the middle of its span Thursday when it collapsed, throwing workers off the structure, the Dahe Newspaper said.

Iraq vows to teach US a lesson

Baghdad ready for neutral arms inspectors' entry

AFP, Baghdad

A defiant Iraq warned the United States on Friday it would be taught a lesson it will never forget if it launched a military campaign against Saddam Hussein's regime, threats of which it said left the Iraqi people unbowed.

"The Iraqis are ready to engage in a war against the United States and are determined to teach the Americans a lesson they will never forget," the official Al-Iraq newspaper vowed.

"Statements and threats by American officials cannot terrorise the people of Iraq because their victory over the United States is guaranteed," the daily said.

Ath-Thawra, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party in Baghdad, accused Washington of "adopting a policy of lies towards Iraq by making believe that the country produces weapons of mass destruction."

The papers were reacting to statements Thursday by US President George W. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, that there was a "very powerful moral case" for ousting the Iraqi leader.

"This is an evil man who, left to his own devices, will wreak havoc again on his own population, his neighbours and, if he gets weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them, all of us," she said.

In Washington, the State Department said overnight it believed paperwork would soon be completed to allow an eight-million-dollar grant for the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an umbrella of Iraqi opposition groups, to go

through after a three-month delay.

"We discussed the offer with the Iraqi National Congress leadership over the course of the last week and we do anticipate finalising an agreement very soon," deputy spokesman Philip Reeker said.

"We're anxious to continue our support ... for the Iraqi National Congress," Reeker said. "We believe that the INC can continue to play a productive and useful role through the activities proposed in our new agreement."

The money is to go to fund the INC newspaper, television station and regional offices, including an office of humanitarian relief, he said.

Reeker's comments came a week after representatives of six Iraqi opposition groups, including the INC, met here with senior US officials including Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to discuss ways in which Saddam Hussein could be ousted.

Meanwhile, Britain's Independent newspaper reported Friday that Iraq would agree to the return of UN arms inspectors if they were accompanied by neutral observers including British religious leaders.

Quoting unnamed senior diplomatic sources, the daily said Baghdad will send a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan demanding that any observers ensure the inspections were not spying missions.

The letter would also demand that "doctored findings of weapons of mass destruction" were not used to justify a US attack against Saddam's regime, the sources told the paper.

Palestinians for rescuing talks as Israel keeps up crackdown

AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinians were attempting Friday to revive stalled talks on finding a common strategy against Israel, whose army continued its get-tough policy of destroying the houses of militants and their families. Israeli troops dynamited Friday morning the West Bank house of an Islamic Jihad suicide bomber who killed 17 people in June in the northern Israeli town of Meggido, military sources said.

Palestinian security sources said the man's brother was arrested.

The army destroyed a second house, near Tulkarem, which belonged to a Palestinian who shot and wounded two Israeli policemen

in the Israeli Arab village of Taibeh seven months ago, the sources said.

These were the latest operations under Israel's controversial policy of deterring would-be attackers by demolishing houses belonging to radical militants and rounding up their families and threatening them with deportation to the Gaza Strip.

Israel this week stepped up demolitions, which rights groups say are the latest form of collective punishment used by the army, as its closure of the West Bank has struggled to prevent anti-Israeli attacks.

Palestinian factions were still at odds Friday over whether to carry on with attacks inside Israel, but appeared determined to continue

seeking a unified stance on ways of fighting against Israeli occupation.

Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath said Thursday night efforts were under way to rescue the week-long inter-factional discussions after the radical Islamic group Hamas rejected a document on a united leadership.

Shaath told AFP Hamas had backed away from articles in the document endorsed by secular nationalist factions, including Yasser Arafat's Fatah, which called for an end to attacks inside Israel and the creation of a state inside the 1967 borders.

Salty sea spray cleanses air

REUTERS, Washington

Salty sea spray can cleanse the air of pollution, making rain as it scrubs the sky clean, Israeli scientists reported on Thursday.

Rather than all falling back into the sea, some salty drops of water go up into the atmosphere and help make raindrops - which in turn drag particles of pollution down into the water, Daniel Rosenfeld and colleagues at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem found.

The findings, published in Friday's issue of the journal Science, may help scientists find better ways to make rain, said Rosenfeld, a cloud physicist.

People have tried to make rain for centuries, often using salt, but no one knew the process was happening naturally at sea.

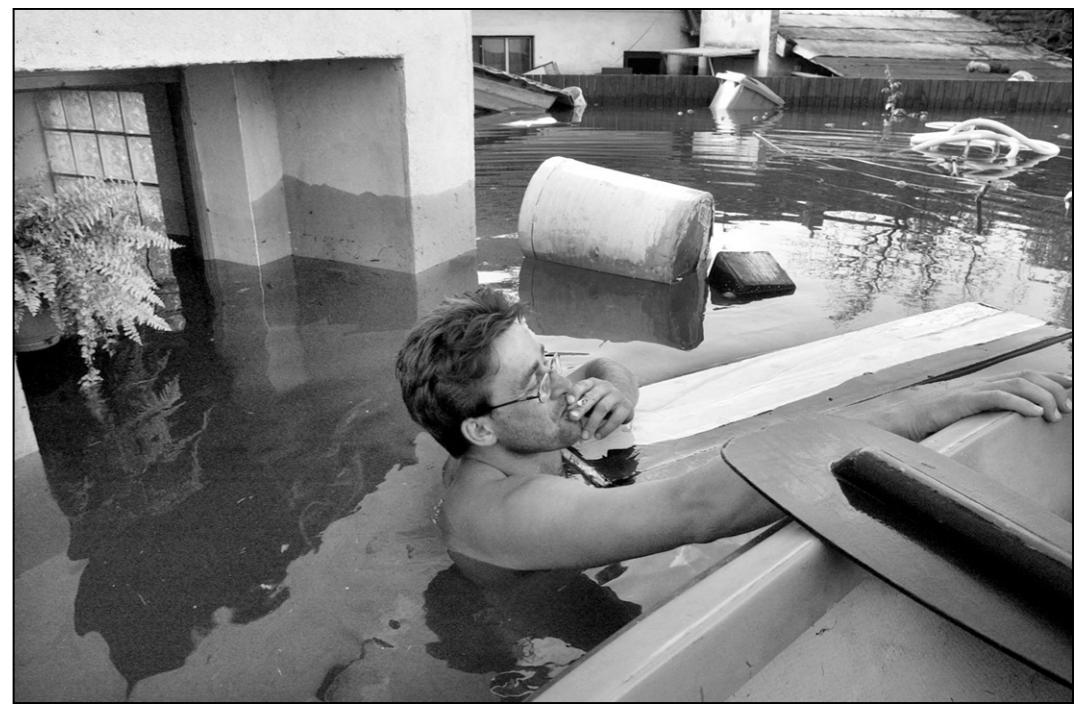


PHOTO: AFP
Petr Kloc smokes a cigarette on Thursday while checking the damage on his family house in the village of Libis near Prague on the third day of devastating floods in the Czech Republic.

Thousands evacuated as Europe counts flood cost

AFP, Dresden

Tens of thousands of people living in and around Dresden were being evacuated early Friday as the Elbe and Danube rivers surged toward record levels, with central Europe's worst floods in memory creating chaos and causing billions of euros (dollars) in damage.

South of this historic east German city, in Pirna and Heidenau, 30,000 people were ordered out of the Elbe's way as the river neared levels not seen since 1845, while in Slovakia the Danube was approaching 50-year highs.

Around 90 people have died since the weekend as the worst floods in

more than a century cascaded across central Europe. The latest was a Czech man killed Thursday in the northern town of Decin.

Floodwaters submerged all the dams in Dresden, further swamping streets, homes and historic landmarks, and the Elbe was expected to pass the 8.77-metre (29-foot) record within hours.

"Some areas will have to expect power outages and shortages of drinking water and food due to road and bridge closures," said the head of the regional crisis team, Karl Bey.

Large swathes of German countryside were under water as thousands of troops and other workers raced to save homes and livelihoods

all along the Elbe. German and US soldiers were called on to help evacuate some 30,000 people from Pirna and Heidenau, as the Elbe spilled over its banks in the late evening. The evacuees were being put up in tents.

Some 4.2 million Germans have been affected by the floods, the government said.

About 100 kilometers (60 miles) northwest of Dresden, near the industrial city of Bitterfeld, a dam collapsed threatening 16,800 residents who were ordered to evacuate, but officials said there was no risk of leakage from the huge complex of chemical factories in the city.



PHOTO: AFP

Head of the newly-formed Kashmir committee, former law minister Ram Jethmalani (L), shakes hand with Democratic Freedom Party spokesman Saleem Geelan (R) as party leader Shabir Shah (C) looks on in Srinagar on Friday. In a fresh initiative aimed at resolving the decades-old conflict over Kashmir kicked off on Friday when the private committee led by Jethmalani and backed by the government arrived and went straight away into talks with separatist leaders.

Talks underway on future of Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A fresh initiative aimed at resolving the decades-old conflict over Kashmir kicked off here Friday when a private committee backed by the Indian government began talks with separatist leaders.

The newly-formed Kashmir committee, headed by former law minister Ram Jethmalani, arrived in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir Friday morning and went straight into talks with Shabir Shah, leader of the Democratic Freedom Party.

Shah is the only separatist leader not affiliated to the main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), which the committee is scheduled to meet on Saturday.

Jethmalani told reporters before

going into the talks that he was "optimistic" that his seven-member committee - which also comprises two newspaper editors - will be able to make some headway in resolving the seemingly intractable problem of the future of Kashmir.

The Himalayan state is divided between India and Pakistan and aggressively claimed by both, while separatists are either demanding it be given its independence or be fully incorporated into Pakistan.

Muslim militants 13 years ago launched an armed insurgency against Indian rule, which has so far claimed some 36,500 lives.

Further muddying the waters is an upcoming election in Indian Kashmir for the state legislature, which the separatists have said they will boycott and the militants

have vowed to disrupt.

In his Independence Day address in New Delhi on Thursday, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee urged Kashmiris to participate in the elections, to be held in four stages starting September 16, which he promised would be free and fair.

He also offered, without elaborating, to rectify past "mistakes" committed by the Indian government in the Muslim-dominated state.

"It (the election) is an opportunity for the people of Jammu and Kashmir to improve their future," Vajpayee said.

"... after elections, (if) some mistakes have happened, we will correct them. For this we will talk to elected representatives and other

organisations. We will also discuss giving more powers."

In his comments to reporters Friday, Jethmalani hailed the prime minister's pronouncements.

"What the prime minister said yesterday, he has said big things and we will have to grab that and find a solution," Jethmalani said.

"We feel that in Kashmir, Kashmiriat (a sense of Kashmir identity) should return immediately," the former law minister said.

"Kashmiriat has weakened over the years. We have to bring it back to health. Strengthen Kashmiriat and then the Kashmir problem will be over."

Jethmalani's committee has the blessing of the Indian government to hold talks with the separatists. Numerous similar initiatives have failed in the past.

Sept 11 victims' families sue Sudan, Saudis

AP, Washington

Some 600 relatives of Sept. 11 victims filed a lawsuit Thursday seeking more than \$100 trillion from the Sudanese government and Saudi officials, banks and charities, charging they financed Osama bin Laden's network and the attacks on America.

The 15-count federal lawsuit, modelled after action filed against Libya in the Pan Am Flight 103 disaster, seeks to cripple banks, charities and some members of the Saudi royal family as a deterrent to terrorist financing schemes.

But the suit also is therapeutic for relatives of the victims, who acknowledge they face long odds of collecting anything.

"It's not the money. We want to do something to get at these people," said Irene Spina, whose daughter, Lisa L. Trerotola, 38, perished in the World Trade Centre. "There's nothing else we can do."

"This is the right thing to do,"

said Matt Sellito, father of Matthew Carmen Sellito, 23, who also died in the World Trade Center. "If the odds are stacked against us, we will beat them."

The 258-page complaint, filed electronically Thursday in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, seeks "an amount in excess of \$100 trillion" and charges the defendants with racketeering, wrongful death, negligence and conspiracy.

Lead attorney Ron Motley said the money would likely come largely from assets held by the defendants in the United States. He said the plaintiffs were after more institutions than those whose assets already have been frozen by the U.S. and other governments.

The complaint also ignores the Bush administration's delicate diplomatic balancing act with Saudi Arabia by bluntly blaming the kingdom's officials and institutions for the attacks.

"That kingdom sponsors terrorism," Motley told reporters at a

news conference. "This is an insidious group of people."

The complaint names more than seven dozen defendants, including the government of Sudan, seven banks, eight Islamic foundations and three Saudi princes.

Those listed include Princes Mohammed al-Faisal and former intelligence chief Turki al-Faisal, Saudi Defense Minister Sultan bin Abdul Aziz al Saud, Khalid bin Salim bin Mahfouz of the National Commercial Bank, and the Faisal Islamic Bank.

Officials from the Saudi Embassy did not immediately return a call for comment.

President Bush's administration has been careful not to blame the Saudi government for the attacks in its drive build a coalition for its war against terrorism.

Prince Saud, the Saudi foreign minister, said last week that the 70-year-old U.S.-Saudi alliance was as solid now as before the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

Lankan opposition hit by internal rift over peace

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition which had hopes of manoeuvring itself back into power was Friday battling an unexpected internal rift as international support mounted for the government's peace drive.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), which is the main parliamentary opposition in the co-habitation government, saw a senior member openly challenging the leadership, party sources said.

They said former minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle questioned Kumaratunga's integrity at a meeting Thursday while a section of the party was in talks with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe about crossing over to government ranks.

Until Thursday, it was the government which appeared unstable, with PA spokesman Sarath Amunugama vowing to muster a majority in the 225-member parliament and form a government amid allegations of a "coup."

"We will form a government

when we have the 113 MPs (for a simple majority). We have plans for it, but we will not disclose our strategy," Amunugama said earlier this week.

However, with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government agreeing on a time-table to open formal peace talks in Thailand, the prime minister has emerged stronger, diplomats said.

Britain, the United States and Japan have welcomed the talks scheduled to take place between September 12 and 17 at a neutral venue in Thailand while Western diplomats said there was widespread support for the start of the negotiating process.

Norway clinched a deal to start the face-to-face talks three years after it assumed the role of a "facilitator" acceptable to both parties.

Government spokesman G. L. Peiris has said constitutional amendments will be moved before the end of August to clip some of President Kumaratunga's powers to sack parliament and to give legislators a conscience vote.

Elvis remembered

AFP, Memphis, Tennessee

Torrential rain failed to dampen the spirits of tens of thousands of devoted Elvis Presley fans as they observed a candlelight vigil for the king of rock n' roll on the 25th anniversary of his death.

An hour-long thunderstorm had threatened to derail the highlight Thursday of a week-long tribute to Presley that saw 100,000 fans take over his hometown of Memphis.

But the rains eased just in time and people, some of whom had been queuing since Wednesday evening, filed solemnly into the grounds of the late singer's mansion, Graceland.

"Rain or shine, we love Elvis," said Holly Travis, who had come

from Toronto, Canada with her husband and two young children.

As the massive crowd along the cordoned-off Elvis Presley Boulevard lit their candles, Todd Morgan, the director of creative development at Elvis Presley Enterprises which runs Graceland, issued a public warning to any troublemakers.

"If you've come here to stir things up or make fun, then heaven help you, because we may not be able to rescue you in time," Morgan said to a resounding cheer.

The vigil began at 9.30 pm (0200 GMT Friday) and was expected to last until 6.00 am on August 16, the day Presley died in 1977 at the age of 42.



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of Elvis fans brave the rain to give a candlelight tribute to Elvis Presley outside the gates of Graceland on Thursday in Memphis, Tennessee. Generations of Elvis Presley fans from around the world took over the city of Memphis queuing for hours in baking heat to pay tribute to a man who, 25 years after his death, remains the undisputed king of rock n' roll.

US troops to remain in Afghanistan for years

REUTERS, Washington

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and U.S. commander for Afghanistan Gen. Tommy Franks acknowledged on Thursday that American troops could be in Afghanistan for years to keep it from reverting to "a terrorist training camp."

"We are engaged in military-to-military relationships in a great many countries around the world so it does not surprise me that someone would say, 'Oh gosh, the military's going to be in Afghanistan for a long, long, time,'" Franks told reporters at the Pentagon. "Sure we will be."

Asked specifically whether he agreed with a U.S. official's assess-

ment that the U.S. military would stay in Afghanistan for years, Franks replied, "I would agree with that."

Rumsfeld, who shared the podium with Franks at a briefing, talked of the phases of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan since the Sept. 11 attacks on America, and said the current phase was aimed at preventing large concentrations of Taliban and al Qaeda forces from regathering.

"We didn't go in there to leave in a way that allows it to turn back into a terrorist training camp, we went in there so that that would not happen," Rumsfeld said. "And the end-state is when the Afghan government has the capability to provide for its own security."