

800 missing as Lankan flood waters rising

THE ISLAND/ ANN, Colombo

The number of persons missing was as high as 700 to 800 due to flash floods and landslides in the South Western region of in Sri Lanka.

The number of missing persons and the death toll due to flash floods that hit several areas of the country kept rising on Monday while many lowlands in the Kalutara, Galle, Matara and Hambanthota districts reported rising water levels.

The number of missing persons were as high as 700 to 800, government officials and police said. They confirmed that sudden floods and landslides in the South Western region of the country spanning the Ratnapura, Kalutara, Matara, Galle and Hambanthota districts at least claimed 237 lives. The official figure of displaced persons was 171,379 Social Services Ministry said.

District Secretary of Ratnapura Malini Premaratne said there were 93 confirmed deaths in her district and 46 bodies had been recovered. She said that in many areas dead bodies stuck in the mud were

visible but rescue workers were unable to recover them due to the difficulty and danger in reaching those places. Seventeen more bodies had been recovered from the landslide site in Palawela, Alapatha.

She said that a large number of phone calls were being received at the Ratnapura District Secretariat by people marooned in high elevation places, upper stories of houses and rooftops. Most people were using cellular phones to send SOS messages to the district secretariat, she said.

The number of deaths confirmed from Deniyaya in the Matara district was 53. Floods in Morawaka and Akuressa in the Matara district continued although the waters were gradually subsiding, reports from the area said. A number of landslides had also occurred in Deniyaya which had claimed many lives, reports said.

The government of India had immediately responded to a plea by the Sri Lankan government for assistance. The Indian Naval ship "Sharda" sailing from Cochin was to reach Galle harbour by yesterday afternoon. The High Commission of India said the ship was equipped

with search and rescue Chetak helicopter with winch and was carrying a team of doctors and medicines. It is also carrying more than 30 specialised divers, inflatable dinghies and foodstuff including milk powder, mineral water, rice, dhal and other emergency relief.

Rescue missions by the Navy and the Airforce continued through yesterday. Foodstuff to marooned people was being provided using Airforce helicopters. The Airforce was also engaged in rescue missions in landslide affected areas specially in Palawela, Alapatha. Navy said they had to join three boats together to face the strong water flow.

Reports said water levels in the lowlands of the Kalutara, Galle and Matara districts kept rising as water was now flowing into those areas from high elevation valleys and river basins. The Kalutara District Secretary had ordered the immediate removal of sand bund at the mouth of the Kaluganga. In the Galle district Udugama, Hiniduma and Baddegama reported increasing water levels. People were taking shelter in areas of high elevation since they had been warned to do

so.

In Ratnapura Navy had rescued a group of 13 on the rooftop of their house with a coffin. Flood waters had flown in while they were preparing their grandmother's funeral.

The special Disaster Management Committee of the government headed by Minister Karu Jayasuriya met yesterday morning. The Committee is compromises Defence Minister Tilak Marapane, Interior Minister John Amaratunga and Social Services Minister Ravindra Samaraweera. They had discussed on measures to provide immediate relief to victims.

An emergency meeting of the Disaster Management Cell of the Health Ministry also met yesterday to take appropriate measures to prevent a breakout of water borne diseases. The Medical Research Institute had been instructed to increase the surveillance activities for waterborne diseases. A request had been made to the World Health Organisation to provide 100,000 water purification tablets, 600,000 doses of JE vaccines and 10,000 oral Typhoid vaccines.



A family carries their pets to safety on Monday in the flooded district of Matara in southern Sri Lanka. More than 200 people are feared dead in the worst flooding in 56 years, prompting Sri Lanka to appeal for international assistance to handle the massive search and rescue operation.



An Acehnese woman tosses water at her house to stop a fire as a primary school burns across the street at the village of Bireuen, near Lhokseumawe in Aceh province on Tuesday. Indonesia's military chief ordered his men to "exterminate" Aceh separatist guerrillas who refuse to surrender as a huge offensive in the province went into its second day.

World not ready for new SARS-like illness: WHO

REUTERS, AFP, Geneva

The world must tighten its defenses against infectious disease because other potential killers like SARS are sure to come along, World Health Organization officials said Monday.

A new influenza pandemic, similar to those that killed millions in the 20th century, is overdue and countries need to be ready, they told a news conference.

"There will be more outbreaks like SARS. Influenza will almost certainly occur as its did three times in the last century as well as diseases we do not yet know," said David Heymann, WHO head of communicable diseases.

The officials said the battle against SARS, which was slowly being brought under control, at least outside China, showed what could be done when international health authorities acted together.

"But we still...need to tighten global surveillance and (disease) response," said Guenaël Rodier, WHO director of communicable

disease and response.

China was initially criticized by the organization for being slow to provide details of an outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in the southern province of Guangdong, where the virus is believed to have started last November.

But the officials stressed that China, which has been the hardest hit by SARS, was now cooperating fully with the UN agency.

Heymann said one way to strengthen the world's defenses would be to invest more heavily in laboratories and epidemiological research.

SARS, for which there are no treatments other than intensive care and which is fatal in some 15 percent of cases, has killed 642 and infected 7,860 worldwide, with China and Hong Kong accounting for the bulk of the cases.

Heymann said WHO remained confident the disease could be eradicated, despite the number of cases continuing to rise in China.

"We believe we will put it back in

the box," he said.

AFP adds: The head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Monday said the outbreak of SARS had served as a "wake-up call" and urged greater international cooperation in fighting the deadly flu-like illness and others like it.

"Globalisation of disease and threats to health mean globalisation of the fight against them," WHO Director-General Gro Harlem Brundtland told the opening day of the UN health agency's annual assembly.

"SARS has been a wake-up call," she told delegates.

International scientific cooperation in recent weeks in fighting the deadly pneumonia-like virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, had been "exemplary and inspiring", Brundtland said.

But, she warned: "The battle is not yet won. We must be vigilant."

SARS has now left more than 600 people dead and nearly 8,000 infected in around 30 countries since it first emerged in southern China last November.

'SE Asia a likely target for new terror attack'

AFP, Hong Kong

A new terrorist attack in Southeast Asia in the coming months is a real possibility, analysts warn, as a fresh worldwide campaign by militant Islamic groups appears to be underway.

Butyued by a resurgent al-Qaeda -- suspected of involvement in the suicide attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco last week -- Asian-based groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) are poised to strike again, the analysts say.

"It is almost certain that there will be more attacks in Asia -- it's happened before, in Bali, so why shouldn't it happen again?" said Dr Andrew Tan of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore.

The bombings of two Bali nightclubs last October that claimed 202 lives, was seen as a horrifying wake up call for Asian authorities to the threat of terrorism in the region.

Tigers soften stand on Tokyo aid meet amid diplomatic push

AFP, Colombo

Intense moves by Norway showed signs of ending the impasse in Sri Lanka's peace process as Tiger rebels softened their stand on attending next month's donors conference in Tokyo, diplomatic sources said Tuesday.

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen held talks with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and moderate Tamil political parties here Monday in a bid to jumpstart the stalled peace bid, government officials said.

Helgesen declined comment, but officials and diplomatic sources said diplomatic efforts since Saturday showed signs of positive results as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) agreed to consider fresh proposals.

Beijing steps closer to containing SARS

AFP, Beijing

Beijing is close to containing SARS, health officials said Tuesday while cautioning that a too complacent attitude could lead to a rebound in the epidemic.

"Although we've reached a state of preliminary containment, the prevention work still faces a complex situation," Ji Lin, deputy head of the Beijing municipal group on SARS control, told a briefing.

"As people start inter-acting more and as the economy and social life gradually return to normal, anti-prevention work is necessary to stop the epidemic from rebounding," he said.

Tuesday's briefing came as Beijing -- the worst hit city in the world by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome with 150 deaths among 2,437 infected patients -- is claiming a steep fall in the number of new cases.

Indonesian troops move to 'exterminate' Aceh rebels

GAM leaders vow to fight on until independence

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's military chief ordered his men on Tuesday to "exterminate" Aceh separatist guerrillas who refuse to surrender as a huge offensive in the province went into its second day.

"Hunt them down and exterminate them," General Endriartono Sutarto told around 400 officers in a briefing in the provincial capital.

Indonesia has launched its biggest military operation since the 1975 invasion of East Timor in an attempt to finish off the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Thousands of troops, backed up by aircraft and warships, are taking part.

Sutarto said rebels would be well treated if they give up.

"But if they continue to be

stubborn and raise arms, and continue to cause suffering to the people, then your sole duty is to exterminate them," he said.

He ordered soldiers to avoid civilian casualties and said any excesses against civilians would bring severe punishment.

"What you are doing here now is being broadcast all over the world," Sutarto told them.

"If there are soldiers who do violate (the order) and cause suffering to people in the field, then just shoot them in the head," he told the officers.

The assault began early Monday, hours after last-ditch peace talks broke down in Tokyo. Hundreds of extra troops parachuted into the province on Sumatra island or waded ashore

from landing craft in the first deployment of reinforcements.

The military said resistance so far was lighter than expected but blamed rebels for torching 30 schools.

Meanwhile, top leaders of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) were quoted as saying in Japan Monday that they were determined to fight on until they won independence from Indonesia for their province.

"We are ready to fight, we will fight to the end," GAM leader Malik Mahmud said in an interview to Kyodo News.

"We have a democratic right to fight for our independence," said the rebel leader, who calls himself "prime minister" of Aceh.

C'wealth debates lifting Pakistan's suspension

AFP, London

Foreign ministers on a Commonwealth action group were meeting in London Tuesday to decide whether to restore Pakistan's membership of the 54-nation body, suspended after a 1999 military coup.

Australia said it would also present the ministers with a damning report on human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, in hopes of spurring new sanctions against President Robert Mugabe's regime.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meeting was expected "to focus primarily on the situation in Pakistan and its status in the Commonwealth," the

group said in a statement.

A Commonwealth source told AFP: "It's possible that they could recommend a change of status for Pakistan."

General Pervez Musharraf, now Pakistan's president, prompted an international outcry when he seized power and deposed the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup over three years ago.

Earlier this month, Pakistan urged the Commonwealth to rescind its suspension, saying that democracy had been restored following elections in October last year which led to the induction of a civilian government headed by Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali.

Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri told Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon that "it was for the Commonwealth to do the right thing for Pakistan now."

Soon after the formation of Jamali's government in November, McKinnon said in a statement that, with the restoration of the provincial and national assemblies, Pakistan had taken an important step towards the full restoration of democracy.

But a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group which met on November 1 voted to maintain Pakistan's suspension, saying it would be premature to conclude that democracy has been restored.



Filipino fishermen hold banners after releasing a white dove to symbolise peace in the strife-torn southern Philippine island of Mindanao during a peace action in Manila on Tuesday. Some 18,000 civilians have been displaced in military offensives since President Gloria Arroyo, now on a state visit to the US, ordered a massive assault against separatists allegedly linked to terrorists in the south.

Court throws out petition seeking trial of Musharraf

AP, Lahore

A Pakistani court on Monday threw out a petition seeking to put President Pervez Musharraf on trial on treason charges for failing to step down as military ruler of the country, the lawyer who filed the petition said.

The court said it lacked the authority to accept the petition, said A K Dogar, a private lawyer who filed the case against Musharraf in the High Court in the eastern city of Lahore.

"Under the constitution of Pakistan, a petition seeking high treason charges against the President cannot be filed in the Lahore High Court, so the petition is dismissed," Dogar quoted the chief judge of the court, Iftikhar Hussain Chaudhry, as saying in the ruling.

Dogar said he would wait for the court to issue the ruling in writing before filing an appeal. Courts in Pakistan usually announce a quick short judgment and later issue a detailed ruling in writing, citing grounds for the decision.

Tension in Madurai as former DMK minister killed

PTI, Madurai

Former DMK minister and two-time MP, T Kiruttinan, was killed early Tuesday while he was returning home from a morning walk.

Family members, who heard his cries, rushed out of the house and saw him lying in a pool of blood on a nearby road. He was taken to a private hospital, where he was pronounced dead, police said.

The former minister is survived by his wife, a son who is employed in America and a daughter, residing at Chennai.

Kiruttinan, who was zonal-in-charge of Sivaganga and Madurai districts, had had hectic discussions about the DMK's organisational elections till late last night and had problems in resolving factional feuds in the party.

Chinese floods threaten Yunnan, Chongqing

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

Southwest China braced itself for downpours Monday as a belt of rain headed for the area from central and southern parts of the country, part of which was heavily hit by floods.

But light to moderate showers are still forecast for the coming days along the Xiangjiang River in Hunan Province, where floods triggered by continuous torrential rain in the past week killed 25 people and left 13 others missing.

Meanwhile, prolonged drought has been hitting some parts of North China and Northeast China.

The China Meteorological Administration warned some regions in Yunnan Province and Chongqing Municipality of possible torrential rain in the coming days.