

US aid workers join Iran quake relief

BBC ONLINE

Aid workers from the US have joined efforts in Iran to help people affected by Friday's devastating earthquake.

It is the first official representation by Americans since Washington cut ties with Iran after the 1979 revolution.

Teams from 40 countries are helping thousands of residents in the city of Bam who are spending a sixth day outside in harsh conditions.

The quake destroyed 90% of houses in Bam and is believed to have left between 40,000 and 50,000 people dead.

President Mohammed Khatami welcomed the US participation, but stressed that it did not change relations between the two countries.

The 80-strong US team has started setting up a field hospital -

the first to operate since Bam's own two hospitals were flattened in the earthquake.

USAid spokesman Dewy Perks told the BBC it was an honour to be helping the people of Iran on behalf of the US Government. It was "not about politics, it's about humanitarian relief", he said.

Iraq has also sent a 55-strong medical team, the head of the Iraq's Red Crescent Society Ezzeddin Chalabi said, and truckloads of emergency supplies have been sent from Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.

Under Saddam Hussein's leadership, Iran and Iraq fought a devastating eight-year war in the 1980s, but relations have improved since his overthrow.

Tons of humanitarian aid have been pouring into Iran, and there have been pledges of \$500m in aid from the international community.

Planeloads of tents, blankets,

taraulins, building materials, medicine, water and food are being stockpiled at Bam's small airport, said UN co-ordinator Ted Pearn.

Most international rescuers in Bam have now abandoned their search for survivors and the focus of the humanitarian effort is being switched towards providing longer-term relief.

However, residents are still asking for teams to search some areas, Mr Pearn said.

Unconfirmed reports on state television said two men and two women had been found alive on Tuesday evening by the Iranian army and transferred to a nearby hospital.

About 2,000 people have been saved from the rubble, while about 30,000 corpses have been recovered.

Bodies are being swiftly buried and the authorities are trying to identify hundreds of unidentified

victims, with often-gruesome photographs being shown to relatives on computers at Bam's burial grounds.

The number of dead seems set to rise much higher, but the final figure may never be known as entire families have died and there is no-one left to register them as missing.

"If we consider that, on average, five people lived in each house we can say the death toll will reach 50,000," one Iranian official said.

President Khatami - who has pledged to rebuild Bam's 2,000-year-old citadel "whatever the cost" and to rebuild the city within two years - told reporters he believed the number of dead would be about 40,000.

Iran's health ministry says 14,360 were injured, of whom 8,500 have been admitted to hospital in the nearby city of Kerman, as well as in the capital Tehran and other provinces.



Wearing face masks an Iranian family walks in the ruins of the devastated southeastern Iranian city of Bam yesterday after an earthquake measuring 6.3 on the open-ended Richter scale hit the city December 26. Some 40,000 people were killed in the temblor, and many more left homeless.

4-month-old baby pulled alive from ruins

AFP, Tehran

Rescue workers in and around the shattered Iranian city of Bam pulled out five people -- including a four-month-old baby and a 12-year-old girl -- alive from the wreckage of last week's earthquake, local media reports said.

State radio said four of the five latest survivors were found in the village of Baravat, located near Bam.

Press reports said the young girl was trapped in the kitchen of her home when the quake hit, allowing her access to food while she awaited rescue. Further details on the other survivors were not immediately available.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami thanked the United States and other nations who have rushed to provide aid to the quake-stricken region but ruled out the prospect of political dialogue with Washington without a radical shift in US policy after decades of enmity.



Rescuers remove a body from the rubbles of the two factory buildings of Changtu Safe Environment Color and Noise Co Ltd in Shuangmiaozhi township, northeastern China's Liaoning province on Tuesday. The death toll from a massive fireworks factory blast rose to 37 yesterday as the owner of the illegal operation was arrested, state media and local officials said, while another 17 injured people were still being treated in hospital.

Musharraf endorses bill to legitimise his rule

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf approved a constitutional amendment yesterday that endorses his right to stay on as leader until 2007 and allows him to seek a vote of confidence on his presidency from lawmakers, officials said.

Under the bill, Musharraf will quit as chief of the country's army by the end of 2004 and seek a vote of confidence from the two houses of parliament and four provincial legislative assemblies on Thursday.

Musharraf summoned the parliament to meet in Islamabad at 11:00 am (0800 GMT) Thursday for the confidence vote.

"He will get an overwhelming majority, more than the two-thirds cast in favour of the amendment bill," Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali told reporters.

The bill, which has already been adopted by the parliament, has now become part of the country's 1973 constitution, officials said.

The amendment also enshrines Musharraf's power to sack the

parliament.

It was part of a deal struck last week between the ruling coalition and the Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) Islamic alliance to end a power tussle between the government and the opposition which had deadlocked parliament for more than a year.

At a meeting after the bill was signed, Jamali and Musharraf expressed hope that its passage would mean "a new era of political and democratic stability will dawn in the country," state media said.

It said Musharraf, who escaped unhurt from two assassination attempts this month, and Jamali resolved "to steer the country to sustainable socio-economic progress in an environment of harmony and stability."

Legislators from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), both secular parties led by exiled former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif respectively, boycotted the vote on the bill saying it gives too much power to the president.

"The basic structure of the constitution has been altered and

all powers have been vested in a single individual," PPP senator Raza Rabbani said.

Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999 and declared himself president in June 2001. He was elected president in a controversial referendum in April 2002.

He held elections in October 2002 to revive parliament but refused to give up powers, including to sack the parliament, that he gave himself in unilateral changes to the constitution just two months before the polls.

Analyst and human right activist I. A. Rehman said on Tuesday that Musharraf's government had won the battle over his powers.

"It conceded nothing. It has changed the system from the parliamentary form to the presidential form of government, Musharraf retains all powers," Rehman told AFP.

However MMA leader Liaquat Baloch has said the new constitutional bill restored the parliament's supremacy and meets a key demand that the president shed his army uniform.

Taiwan leader signs bill on referendum

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian has signed a historic bill that allows him to stage the referendum that has so infuriated those in mainland China.

Chen signed the document in the Presidential Office witnessed by his chief aide Chiou I-jen and several parliamentarians from his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), officials said.

"This is a historic moment...it enables us to fulfill our dream," Chen was quoted by an official as saying after he signed the bill.

"Hopefully with the enforcement of the law, the fundamental rights and universal value of referendums would be shared by the 23 million people in Taiwan," Chen said.

The new law will become effective on Friday.

Chen had pledged to hold the island's first ever referendum alongside the presidential polls on March 20, aiming to demand Beijing remove hundreds of ballistic missiles targeting the island.

Beijing issues Sars alert for schools

AFP, Beijing

Education authorities in Beijing issued a SARS alert Wednesday urging all educational institutes and schools to heighten vigilance against an outbreak of the dreaded respiratory disease, state press said.

The alert was issued to all institutes and schools to carry out health checks on all people returning from southern Guangdong province, where the nation's first SARS case since last spring's outbreak was detected over the weekend, Xinhua news agency said.

The notice also urged all students to be on alert during the upcoming Spring Festival, or China's Lunar New Year holiday, with schools expected to embark on a month-long break beginning in mid-January.

Colleges and universities in Beijing were also required to maintain contacts with all students who return to their hometowns during the break and "to brace for any possible SARS cases," it said.

Guangdong health officials said Tuesday that a 32-year-old freelance journalist had come down with SARS on December 16, but the central ministry of health is still going over tests to verify the findings.

Syria condemns Golan expansion plan

Israeli copter targets Hamas militants

REUTERS, Damascus

Syria denounced yesterday plans by Israel to double the number of settlers in the Golan Heights to tighten the Jewish state's grip over the plateau seized from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war.

"There is no recognition for this measure. Israel is deluded that it can achieve something by relying on power and occupation," Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Isa Daweesh told Reuters.

"Practically, Israel cannot gain anything out of this move because it is not legitimate."

Israeli Agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz said Wednesday the right-wing government had agreed on the plan to solidify its hold over the strategic heights before opening any peace negotiations with Syria.

Asked if Israel's move was a step to pre-empt any future peace negotiations between the two countries, Daweesh said: "Conflicts are not resolved through power, they should be resolved under international law."

Israel conquered the Golan

Heights in the 1967 Middle East War and annexed it in 1981, a move condemned internationally. About 17,000 Jewish settlers now live in the Golan.

Syria rejected Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights in 1981 and demands all Israeli-occupied lands be returned before any peace agreement. U.S.-brokered negotiations between Syria and Israel broke down in 2000.

AP from Gaza city: An Israeli helicopter fired two missiles at a car carrying militants from the violent Islamic Hamas, wounding 11 people despite earlier reports that Israel and the militant group had reached an agreement to halt violence.

Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin said Israel would pay a heavy price for Tuesday's attack.

"These massacres and crimes prove that Israel is seeking violence and not looking for peace, security and stability," he told Associated Press Television News.

The attack after nightfall ended a two-month hiatus that had led to the reports that Israel and Hamas had reached an informal agree-

ment Hamas would halt attacks inside Israel, and the Israelis would stop targeting Hamas leaders. The agreement, if it existed, appeared in jeopardy after the air strike.

As recently as Friday, the commander of the Israeli military, Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon was quoted by an Israeli paper as saying Hamas had stopped attacks inside Israel, crediting Israeli military strikes for cowering the group. Israeli security sources said at the same time that Israel would hold off on attacks against Hamas.

However, after Tuesday's air strike, Israel's military issued a statement saying the targets were "senior Hamas terrorists...actively engaged in planning terror attacks."

Witnesses said the two missiles missed a car in which two people were riding and the men escaped. It was not clear if the men were among the wounded. Hamas officials said one of them was a mid-level commander, Jamal Jara.

The Apache helicopters opened fire as the Fiat was traveling toward the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood, a Hamas stronghold, witnesses said.

Gunfire erupts in Kirkuk, 2 reported killed

AP, Kirkuk

Gunfire erupted yesterday as hundreds of protesters marched in Kirkuk and at least two people were reported killed in the oil-rich northern city where plans for a new democratic Iraq are dividing Kurd, Arab and Turkmen residents.

Police Col. Salem Taha said two protesters were killed and 16 were wounded in the shooting. A reporter saw six people hit by gunshots, and heard sirens as ambulances rushed to the rescue.

Witnesses fleeing the scene said police opened fire on the crowd, but police said the shots came from members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, as demonstrators tried to converge on that party's office.

US soldiers moved in with tanks to barricade the area and set up checkpoints at major intersections.

Hundreds of Arabs and Turkmen began protesting Wednesday morning to demand that Kirkuk remain under a central Iraqi government and not be incorporated into any proposed Kurdish federation.

"Kirkuk is an Iraqi city!" protesters shouted. "Down with federalism."

The exact division of the population of Kirkuk is not known. It is believed that residents are divided equally between three ethnic groups - Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds.



An Indian Sikh man fills out a form while purchasing tickets at the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) office in New Delhi yesterday.

Indo-Pak airlink to resume in Jan 2004

PTI, New Delhi

Indian Airlines would start regular operations to Pakistan from January 9 with a twice weekly Delhi-Lahore-Delhi flight, it was decided here on Tuesday.

The IA would also operate two special flights -- primarily to carry mediapersons and officials for the Saarc Summit -- each on January 2 and January 7 to Islamabad, airline officials said, adding that bookings for the regular Delhi-Lahore flights would be open from Wednesday.

Pakistan International Airlines has already announced launching of direct flights to Delhi and Mumbai from January 1.

The aviation links between India and Pakistan were snapped from January 1, 2002, after the terrorist attack on Parliament on December 13, 2001.