

Rescues dry up in Iran a week after tremor

REUTERS, Bam, Iran

The trickle of survivors pulled alive from the rubble of the Bam earthquake dried up yesterday, one week after the pre-dawn tremor struck.

Rescuers found a man, a child and a pregnant woman in the remains of the ancient Iranian Silk Road City on Thursday. At least six others had been found since Tuesday despite what experts say are long odds of survival beyond 72 hours without food or water in such conditions.

Such "miracles," as rescue workers have dubbed them, have been fewer in this earthquake than many others in the past due to the mud-brick construction materials used in Bam which crumbled to dust, leaving few air pockets for survivors.

The quake, which measured 6.8 on the Richter scale, struck directly beneath Bam while most of its 100,000 people slept.

At least 30,000 people died and government officials have said the final toll may reach 50,000, making it one of the world's worst disasters of recent decades.

Seven survivors succumbed to their injuries after being evacuated to the central Iranian city of Isfahan

and several others in the city were in critical condition, the official Iran news agency reported.

But with international aid pouring in to the affected area in south-east Iran, relief workers said health fears had abated.

"The risks one might have had are no longer ... There's been no outbreak of contagious disease," Frederick Lyons, the United Nations' resident coordinator in Iran, told Reuters in Bam.

Lyons said that with the search and rescue phase now over, the UN would launch a flash appeal for funds next week to address survivors' primary needs for shelter, food and water.

"Made world cry"

"The world will always remember Bam," Iran's influential former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on Thursday told a mourning service in Bam, 625 miles southeast of the capital Tehran. "It caused the world to cry," he said.

Stunned survivors huddled against the cold in tents or on streets and searched the ruins for friends and families as aftershocks kept people on edge.

Aid from some 50 countries has flooded in to help the stricken area,

prompting an apparent thaw in relations between Iran and the United States after years of hostilities.

Iranian officials hinted on Thursday that US aid to earthquake victims may have eased decades of mistrust.

Rafsanjani told reporters recent developments may have an effect on US relations. President Mohammad Khatami's brother went further, implying the US response to the quake might lead to an unspecified reciprocal gesture from Iran.

Washington broke ties with Iran shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution and dubs it part of an "axis of evil."

But it has sent scores of relief workers to Bam and tons of aid to Iran, temporarily easing some sanctions on the Islamic Republic to speed the delivery of humanitarian relief, and hinted of a willingness to resume some dialogue with Tehran.

US President George W. Bush said on Thursday he appreciated Iran's willingness to accept US humanitarian aid flights but urged Tehran to abandon nuclear weapons and turn over members of al-Qaida in its custody.

Anti-Ahmadiyya group issues fresh threat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An alliance of Muslim fundamentalists yesterday took oath to launch a holy war (jihad) against Ahmadiyyas if the government does not declare them non-Muslims by January 9.

The orthodox group Hifajate Khatme Nabuwat Andolon (HKNA), the movement to conserve the right of the last prophet claims Ahmadiyyas, followers of Mirza Golam Ahmad Kadiyani, are heretics and dishonouring Islam by identifying themselves as Muslims.

"We hereby are taking oath to cleanse the society of anti-Islam elements (Ahmadiyyas) as time has put the responsibility on us as imandar (faithful) Muslims," some 3,000 HKNA diehardswowed from a demonstration at Mirpur-1 in the city yesterday.

"Since the government, which was expected to declare them non-Muslims and evict them from their mosques, is indifferent to its duties, we, as custodians of Islam, have to shoulder the responsibility and do the necessary," said Mahmudul Hasan Mamtazi, amir of the Andolon.

"We will either die as martyrs or live as gazis (victors), but will ensure that no-one dares to speak against or stigmatise Islam till there is a drop of blood in our veins," he vowed, echoed by the participants of the gathering, organised to drum up support for a January 9 demonstration at Nakhapara in the city to drive out Ahmadiyyas from their mosque there.

"We will also simultaneously gherao (lay siege to) other Ahmadiyya mosques across the country the same day," he added.

The HKNA organised the demonstration in front of Shah Ali Complex at Mirpur-1 with its executive president Mostafa Azad

in the chair, after Juma prayers.

Yesterday's demonstration was the last of a series carried out since November 21 designed to cover the whole city to get support for their January 9 ultimatum.

"Get ready for a war, turn your blood into petrol to burn all anti-Islamic elements," HKNA vice president Nur Hossain Nurami urged the participants.

"Beware, we haven't taken to the street for any petty target," he warned the government. "As still there is time, pay attention to us and declare the Ahmadiyyas non-Muslims. Otherwise, you will find no way to avoid bloodshed."

HKNA Joint Secretary General Nazmul Haq said, "Call a special session of the Jatiya Sangsad before January 9 and pass a law to declare the Ahmadiyyas non-Muslims."

"None can accept Ahmadiyyas' claim of being Muslims and their places of worship as mosques while they identify their leader Mirza Golam Ahmad as the last prophet," said Shamsul Haq, president of Aamra Dhakabashi, a socio-cultural organisation.

The participants later brought out a procession which ended in front of the Chhayaneer Super Market at Mirpur 1.

Offering prayers there, the anti-Ahmadiyyas took oath for the jihad.

Earlier at 10:00am, police took away loudspeakers from the meeting venue giving rise to a tense situation. However, no violence took place as the police returned the horns in the face of the HKNA leaders' demand.

"They did not have any permission, nor even sought for one to stage any rally there," said Assistant Commissioner of Police (Mirpur Zone) Kamrul Ahsan.

"When we pointed this out, they reacted violently," he said.

Giant health plan

FROM PAGE 1

high degrees of micronutrient deficiencies, particularly of vitamin A, iron, iodine and zinc.

Extreme malnutrition also continues to haunt the country's women. More than 50 percent of them suffer from chronic energy deficiency and studies suggest there has been little improvement in women's nutritional status over the past 20 years.

A World Bank nutrition sector paper, "Bangladesh: Breaking the Malnutrition Barrier", estimates that malnutrition costs the country \$1 billion a year. By comparison, the cost of extending nutrition services across the country is just a quarter of that amount -- about \$246 million.

Bangladesh will lose \$22 billion over the next 10 years in productivity costs if it does not invest in nutrition.

Extending essential service package (ESP) to the poor and the most vulnerable through about 11,000 community clinics (CCs) was another major component of the programme.

But, the benefits of the CCs, each designed for catering health services to roughly 6,000 people at union level, is still a dream, although millions of taka have been spent on the construction of the CC buildings.

The family planning (FP) outlet services also faltered. Contraceptive promotion was geared towards temporary method (of using pills and condoms) instead of the long-acting or permanent ones (like sterilisation), which was essential for the reduction of total fertility rate (TFR) and was included in the HPSp. This strategic deviation since 2001 has led to low use of contraceptives.

Even now, 50 percent of the couples do not practice FP in Bangladesh, according to the status of performance indicator of health ministry. Use of contraceptive pills is confined to 23 percent, injection 7.2

percent, traditional method 10.3 percent, intra-uterine device (IUD) 1.2 percent, Norplant 0.5 percent and sterilisation 6.7 percent.

The supply of drugs especially to the rural health centres is scanty. Financial sustainability through health insurance scheme or cost recovery, user fee collection, retention and recycling -- all major reform activities envisaged under the HPSp remain unrealised.

The health ministry had agreed to a number of measures with its development partners to streamline health service delivery system and bring more transparency. But both present and past governments failed to carry out the measures, which at the end of 2001 led to suspension of credit by the donors.

All reform activities stalled then leading to widespread chaos and confusion at the field level, which appears to affect the delivery of health and family planning services.

Talking The Daily Star recently, Health Secretary AFM Sarwar Kamal expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of the HPSp, saying "the health sector is in total disarray."

A recent survey found the percentage of households that rated the government's health and family planning services as good decreasing from 38 in 1999 to less than 10 in 2003.

The same survey, commissioned by the health ministry and the World Bank, found the proportion of households using government health and family planning services to have reduced to only 10 percent.

Both the indicators clearly reflect the mismanagement, poor coordination and performance of the overall health and family planning delivery services. Experts say, the HPSp mission and vision failed largely due to mismanagement and lack of enthusiasm.

Jalil

FROM PAGE 1

Earlier, the AL had scheduled a 'Protest Day' for today and came up with anti-government programmes from a planned grand rally in Dhaka on January 10.

"We'll be forced to call a seven-day hartal if the ruling alliance continues to obstruct our organisational programmes. We have been exercising our political rights in a democratic manner. As the government is not allowing the Awami League to get organised by holding its councils peacefully, we'll launch an all-out anti-government movement after January 3," AL Presidium Member Kazi Jafrullah said.

Addressing an extended meeting of Awami Jubo League in the capital recently, AL President and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina said, "They (BNP-Jamaat) are not capable of facing our party politically and ideologically."

"However... it was possible to get over most of the differences and an agreement has been reached even on Safta. The text of the document may have just been cleaned up," Shashank said.

Kasuri was buoyant on prospects for the signing of Safta, which business leaders hope will transform the home to half the world's poor into a powerful trade bloc.

"I have just come back from the meeting where there was a great degree of warmth and candour and friendship," Kasuri said of the foreign ministers' meeting.

"If we proceed in the same manner in the second session (Saturday), maybe our heads will be, or the summit will be, ready to sign the Safta agreement."

A Pakistani official involved in the negotiations on the amended

2 contractors

FROM PAGE 12

Locals found Solaiman lying unconscious on the road and informed his wife after tracing her from their home address in a diary found on the victim's person. He was later admitted to the DMCH.

In another incident at Nawabpur, four muggers stabbed and robbed fish traders Piar Ali Bepari, 50, and Shafi Bepari, 32, of Tk 5,000 near the Lion's Cinema at around 6:00am.

Three policemen were standing near the spot when the incident happened, Shafi Bepari told reporters at the DMCH.

As the muggers were leaving the scene, the two men called out to the police for help, but the police did nothing other than calling a rickshaw to take them to the hospital.

The traders, who came from Fatullah in Narayanganj to buy fish at Swarighat, were admitted to the DMCH two hours after the incident.

Tremor

FROM PAGE 12

In December 1992 an earthquake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale killed about 2,200 people on the Indonesian island of Flores, east of Bali.

AFP from Mexico City adds: A medium-intensity earthquake centered near Pacific Coast tourist spots was felt as far away as Mexico City, but caused no reported injuries, geological officials said Thursday.

"The only thing was panic among tourists in Acapulco," officials of the Earthquake Alert System told local radio stations.

The quake, measuring 5.3 on the Richter scale, struck at 17:32 pm local time. Its epicenter was in the western state of Guerrero on the Pacific coast, the officials said.

Local radio stations said that poorly built homes suffered damage in Guerrero state and electricity was momentarily cut in the region.

A major earthquake measuring 6.8 on the same scale killed at least 30,000 people in Iran a week ago.



Leaders and activists of the Awami League march in a procession on Bangabandhu Avenue in Dhaka yesterday in support of today's dawn-to-dusk hartal against what the main opposition party said was infringement of its democratic rights by the ruling coalition.

Accord on three pacts

FROM PAGE 1

agreed," Shashank told a briefing after the foreign ministers' meeting, referred to as the Council of Ministers.

They include an expanded regional terrorism agreement, the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (Safta), and a social charter, he said.

"Contrary to the earlier feeling that there might be some delays, somehow considerable progress has been made during consultations of the Council of Ministers."

Shashank said an agreement was reached on an "additional protocol" to an existing anti-terrorism agreement, referring to an extra clause on choking terrorist funding.

"Differences had come because of its definition and scope and the debates in the UN, OIC and other fora. It was possible to bring the focus on the main issue."

Safta had also met problems in earlier negotiations, mainly over smaller countries' anxieties that they would need extra concessions to create a level playing field with India and Pakistan.

"However... it was possible to get over most of the differences and an agreement has been reached even on Safta. The text of the document may have just been cleaned up," Shashank said.

Kasuri was buoyant on prospects for the signing of Safta, which business leaders hope will transform the home to half the world's poor into a powerful trade bloc.

"I have just come back from the meeting where there was a great degree of warmth and candour and friendship," Kasuri said of the foreign ministers' meeting.

"If we proceed in the same manner in the second session (Saturday), maybe our heads will be, or the summit will be, ready to sign the Safta agreement."

A Pakistani official involved in the negotiations on the amended

terrorism pact said it was directed at international terrorism, insisting it did not relate to the insurgency in disputed Kashmir, which Pakistan considers a struggle for self-determination and India considers terrorism.

"The drafting and approval of the anti-terrorism protocol at the delegate level marks a step towards developing a coherent regional response for dealing with the threat of transnational terrorism," the official said.

A report on poverty alleviation was also approved, as was the establishment of a regional development bank, Shashank said.

It was also decided that India would prepare a report on a freedom-from-hunger project within the next three months.

Saarc heads of government will open the three-day summit, the forum's first in two years, on Sunday.

Observers are hoping the nuclear neighbours' leaders will meet for the first time since the tensions on the summit's sidelines.

India's Sinha and Pakistan's Kasuri posed for the cameras smiling and with an arm around each other's backs.

Speaking to reporters with Kasuri at his shoulder, Sinha did not rule out ice-breaking one-on-one talks between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Zafarullah Khan Jamali or President Pervez Musharraf on the summit sidelines.

"We have said that it has not been decided yet," he said before the meeting. "Let the prime minister come tomorrow."

Sinha said the leaders would in any case be meeting at the summit. "They will be meeting socially," he said.

Discussion of bilateral issues at the Saarc summit is forbidden by its charter, but Musharraf and

Vajpayee may use the occasion to advance the shaky reconciliation process.

A breakthrough in their dispute over the Himalayan region of Kashmir is seen as unlikely, but the very fact Vajpayee is visiting Pakistan is seen as a sign of progress.

At best, diplomats say, there is a chance the two sides might quietly agree to open lower-level dialogue between foreign ministry bureaucrats.

In an interview published yesterday, Vajpayee said he was optimistic the dispute could be solved in his lifetime, but only if Islamabad gave up its insistence that Kashmir belonged to Pakistan because of its Muslim majority.

"I remain optimistic about it. But there has to be a fundamental change in Pakistan's perspectives," he said.

"Until it changes its perception about Jammu and Kashmir -- that because it is a Muslim-majority state, it should be a part of Pakistan -- no meaningful discussion can take place on this matter."

HUGESYMBOLISM

Earlier, business leaders said Pakistan and India's \$1.5 billion trade through unofficial channels and third countries could double with a trade deal and better relations.

But there are concerns around the region about dismantling trade barriers that would allow cheap Indian goods to flood markets. Even after a trade deal is signed it is far from clear it will be implemented, analysts say.

One western diplomat said the immediate economic benefits of a free trade agreement might be limited. "But in terms of symbolism and politics it's huge," he told Reuters.

Cold front

FROM PAGE 1

The morning flight of private GMG airlines to Chittagong Shah Amanat International Airport was cancelled and a few Biman flights arrived late at the airport, said The Daily Star Staff Correspondent in Chittagong.

As the chill wind cut through the country, people, especially the elderly and homeless in southwestern districts, lit bonfires to fend off the bite of cold and urban people in Dhaka preferred to stay indoors -- bundled up in warm clothes as yesterday was the day-off for most.

"The cold feels intense because of fog that absorbs body heat," Samerandra Karmakar, deputy director of the meteorological department, told The Daily Star earlier.

Yesterday's lowest temperature in Dhaka was 12.8 degrees Celsius, down from 13 Thursday and the highest at 15.1 degree Celsius, down from 17 the same day in a country that experienced its record lowest temperature in 1968 when mercury slid to 2.8 degrees Celsius in Srimangal.

Launch and ferry operators said the sunless foggy weather was delaying their services for hours. Some local and inter-city trains to northern districts were stranded for 10 hours, while long-haul buses were operating slowly with headlights on.

"The weather over the next couple of days may be even colder and the cold spell that hit Jessore, Chuadanga and Rajshahi the most will spread to some other districts with the same intensity," a weather-mansaid.

Two infants froze to death in Nilphamari, one of the cold-hit districts, on Wednesday and Thursday. The dead are 16-day-old son of Hossain Ali of Jakiganj village in Sadar upazila and 22-day-old daughter of Solaiman of Dhabadanga village in Gorgram union.

Our correspondents from northern districts report: Sunday's rain attended by cold wind rushing from the northern direction touching the Himalayan range worsened the situation.

Hundreds of monga-affected people in the north, especially in shoal areas of the Teesta, are reeling from the cold.

The cold spell in Chittagong was triggered by the influence of a low in the south Bay, the local meteorological office said.

Traffic on roads and highways thinned, as the chill continued without sunshine. The foggy weather system disrupted ship movement in and out of Chittagong port.

US soldier killed

FROM PAGE 12

gents loyal to the former regime. **Ethnic tensions**

In Kirkuk, at least one man was killed and another was wounded overnight as police and protesters clashed in the ethnically divided city, where Kurds, Arabs and Turkish-speaking Turkmen are all bidding for more political say.

Earlier this week, at least five people were killed when gunfire erupted as Turkmen and Arabs faced off with the mainly Kurdish police during a protest against a plan to include Kirkuk in a Kurdish administrative unit.

Kirkuk police commander Shirko Shakir said a protest late on Thursday led to an exchange of gunfire with police, who detained a wounded Arab gunman. Another man, whose ethnicity Shakir declined to specify, was found killed in the area where the latest protest and clashes occurred, he said.

"From the amount of shooting we assume that there are more wounded and killed whose bodies they took away, and we are watching hospitals and private doctors for them," he told Reuters, blaming the violence on

provocateurs loyal to Saddam. "This one had 'Saddam' tattooed on his arms and hands, and that area has pockets of mercenaries and Fedayeen," he said, referring to the ousted strongman's militia.

Arabs and Turkmen in Kirkuk are bitterly opposed to a plan by Kurds for Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council to grant significant autonomy to a Kurdish area based in three provinces they wrested from Baghdad after the 1991 Gulf War, and which would include Kirkuk.

In Baghdad, the US military confirmed that eight people were killed and more than 30 wounded by a New Year Eve car bomb blast at a popular restaurant in a wealthy district of the city. Three Western journalists were among the wounded.

The blast has heightened fears that guerrillas are shifting attacks to softer targets after initially focusing on coalition forces before moving on to targeting Iraqi police and others seen to be cooperating with the occupation.

Bush hopes

FROM PAGE 1

have divided them," he said.

The US President insisted that Pakistan's nuclear weapons "are secure and that is important."

"It is also important that India, as well, have a secure nuclear weapons programme," he said.

AFP adds: Pakistan is ready for bilateral meetings with India at the summit. Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri said.

"The ball is in India's court," Kasuri told reporters after attending a meeting of the seven foreign ministers here.

"It takes two to tango. You require a peace partner. We can't do it by ourselves."

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will have a chance to meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Sunday night when Musharraf hosts a banquet for all visiting Saarc heads of state.

So far Vajpayee has not formally sought a separate meeting with Musharraf, as the five other visiting heads of state have done in accordance with Saarc summit traditions.

If the two do meet, formal discussions are not expected.

Foreign Secretary Shashank repeated yesterday that "no meetings have been fixed."

External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha Thursday insisted that no bilateral meetings had been fixed between Indian and Pakistani leaders.

"No such meeting has been fixed," he said before leaving for Pakistan.

Earlier, reports from Islamabad had talked about a possible meeting between Vajpayee and Pakistani Prime Minister Jamali while efforts were on to have a meeting between Vajpayee and Musharraf.

Golden future

FROM PAGE 12

was soured when she and her mother moved to a neighbouring village. As her mother's past became known, the villagers brought down the same social and economic stigma that Subarna and her mother had to endure in Kandapara.

"My mother had to pay the school principal Tk 5,000 and the village elders Tk 15,000 to let us stay there," Subarna recalled. "She had to spend most of the money she has saved from years of pain at Kandapara."

The frustrating experiences continuously played on the children's mind when they asked the SSS, which was running a drop-in education and recreation centre for the children near the brothel, to take them to an environment where they could "make something of themselves". Shahana, the oldest resident at the children's home, summarised their fate as: "We kicked the drop-in centre but we still had to go back to the brothel."

"No organisation but the Aliya Madrasa considered collaborating with us for fear of brothel gangs or because of the social stigma attached to the children," said SSS Executive Director MA Hamid Bhuiyan, recalling the initial difficulties.

The problems persisted when the children moved to the Madrasa, because the children were unable to accommodate the sharp differences there with their previous life. The children's home emerged as the only alternative.

At the beginning of the children's home, the previous difficulties faced by the CSWs and their children resurfaced as the local community was worried that their youth would be corrupted by the children's presence there. The SSS took recourse to innovation and amiability as they stood alongside the children in their effort to overcome the initial stigma by interacting with the community through invitations to cultural programmes, attending community mosques and schools and establishing an economic link with locals.

"Some were angered by the

children's presence in the community school and mosque," said Shanto, a resident of Kuizbari village. "But after we spent some time with them, we found that they were just like us. We have enjoyed their cultural programmes and they have increased business for the local market. So, we have come to embrace them."

For the children, one of the most important aspects of acceptance was by the other children of the community, especially at schools.

"I started telling my classmates of what I have been through and surprisingly most of them empathised with me and we became friends," explained a bright-eyed Biplob, a student of class nine who attends the local Choto Bashalia High School.

Such stories of friendship offered them a platform to launch into their lives with freshly acquired confidence and knowledge. They have come to dominate results at their local government school every year. At the national level, they have received numerous awards including national awards in karate and invitations to perform in cultural functions from all around the country.

The scope of future economic rehabilitation of the children is broadened with the provision of additional farming and technical skills, coupled with credit loans. The SSS has also started to allocate land to the children's mothers to encourage them to move out of brothels so they can have healthy relations with their rehabilitated children.

The pioneering efforts by the SSS could not be possible without the continuing courage of the children and the support of their conscientious parents that can only provide greater hope for other children silently suffering the harsh realities of Asma, Biplob and Subarna in the 14 large brothel townships and with floating CSWs.

(We urge individuals and organisations to inform us about similar initiatives that we would be happy to write about. Please contact the writer at khan_ash@hotmail.com)