

Indonesia quake kills 23, more feared dead

REUTERS, Jakarta

A powerful earthquake rocked Indonesia's eastern province of Papua early Friday, killing at least 23 people in a coastal town and possibly more in other areas, officials said.

Many people were injured in the quake, which measured 6.9 on the Richter scale and destroyed several buildings in the town of Nabire, they said. The national earthquake center put the epicenter just four miles from Nabire.

The quake closed Nabire's airport and many buildings were

destroyed or set ablaze. Residents fearing aftershocks said they had set up tents near their homes to sleep in.

"According to the latest news in the information center, 23 people died and the number is still growing," said Muhammad Son Ani, district police chief in Nabire, a town of 26,000 people.

"This is only the report from the city, not counting those outside the city because communication lines are dead," he told Reuters by telephone.

Son Ani said 62 injured people had been treated and sent home, 30

were in a military hospital and about 60 in a local hospital.

The local hospital itself had been badly damaged, another official said.

"The victims died because of fallen houses and buildings which could not endure earthquakes. And it was quite a heavy quake," said Fauzi, coordinator of the national earthquake center.

District police chief Son Ani said: "Residents are still afraid and worried that there will be other aftershocks because until now we can still feel the shaking. People are

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Bird flu detected in pigs

AFP, Hanoi

The death of a six-year-old girl has taken Vietnam's death toll from bird flu to 13, as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization says the disease had been detected in pigs in the capital and its environs.

"We have seen evidence from nasal swabs taken from pigs in the Hanoi area that H5N1 is present," Anton Rychener, head of the UN agency in Vietnam told AFP. "We are now studying what the best course of action is."

The World Health Organization has warned that the H5N1 strain of bird flu could kill millions across the globe if it combined with a human influenza virus to create a new highly contagious strain transmissible among humans.

This situation could be exacerbated if pigs are found to carry H5N1 as they are an ideal "mixing vessel" for bird and human viruses, experts say.

Rychener said bird flu had been detected in non-poultry animals in previous bird flu outbreaks around the world.

Vietnam has around 25 million pigs but so far farmers in areas where poultry have fallen ill have not been instructed to slaughter them.

More than 14 million birds out of an estimated 250 million have died or been destroyed in an attempt to prevent further transmission of the disease, which has rapidly spread to 56 of the communist nation's 64 regions.

So far the WHO says it has no concrete evidence

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Delhi studying gas import from Myanmar, Thailand

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India is exploring the possibility of importing natural gas from Myanmar and Thailand either through an overland or undersea pipeline.

India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Exploration Corporation has been asked to conduct a feasibility study of importing the gas it has struck in an off-shore block in Myanmar in collaboration with a consortium which includes South Korea's Daewoo firm.

The study is likely to be ready by June this year, Indian Petroleum Minister Ram Naik said here on January 30 after talks with Myanmar Energy Minister.

The proposed import of gas from Myanmar is part of the two countries' stepped-up efforts for enhancing cooperation in the energy sector in the overall context of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) ambit, officials here say.

Thailand is also understood to have agreed to study the possibility of a gas pipeline across BIMSTEC

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Cellphone, gold worth Tk 30 lakh seized at ZIA

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Customs officials at Zia International Airport (ZIA) seized cell-phone sets, gold-bars and electronic goods worth over Tk 30 lakh from an incoming Bangladesh Biman flight Thursday night.

Mohammad Akhter Hossain (passport No. R-0471740) was carrying a rather heavy haversack that made the customs officials on duty suspicious. Scanning the sack, they found 300 cell-phone sets, 348 cell-phone chargers and four gold-bars weighing 10-tola each.

Akhter took flight No.BG-030 from Dubai. He was handed over to police and is now held at Airport Police Station, with which a case has also been lodged.

Customs personnel also checked four more cartons coming by the same flight and recovered some used contraband electronic goods worth about Tk 2 lakh.

Khulna city AL calls half-day hartal today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Main Opposition Awami League today enforces a half-day hartal in Khulna to protest rise in murders.

The AL city and district units yesterday jointly called the hartal also in protest at the killings of New Age newsman Manik Saha and AL leader Manjur Morshed Labu.

Labu suffered severe injuries in a bomb attack by outlaws on January 29 and succumbed to his injuries at midnight on January 31 at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

AL forms city unit body

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The full-fledged committee of Awami League's city unit was approved yesterday, eight months after its council.

Mohammad Hanif and Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya were chosen to continue another term as president and general secretary respectively on June 18, 2003 council. As many as 69 posts of the committee remained vacant since then.

The AL today formally announces the full committee and introduces it to party activists at AL's central office at Bangabandhu Avenue at 3:00pm.

Prayer Timings		
February 7		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fair	5-40	6-10
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-15	4-30
Maghrib	5-55	6-00
Esha	7-15	7-45

Source: Islamic Foundation

THE STRENGTH WITHIN

Far from the tobacco world

ASHFAQ WARES KHAN

A primary schoolteacher smiled and spoke to 30 children, restless and eager to rush back home. "Yes, you can go home now," the teacher sounded. Sprightly girls and buoyant boys streamed out of the school and scattered.

Liton was among them. Books tucked underarm, he marched off to the playground with some friends. A mischievous grin framing his face somehow managed to veil his story of pain born of poverty that compelled him to toil in the oppressive conditions of a bidi (small, local cigarette) factory.

"I coughed out tobacco dust all the time. I coughed when I woke up. At work too. I'd collapse coughing even when I was playing football with friends." Playing clumsily with his fingers, Liton recollects the unhealthy effect of the time he spent working at one of the 49 bidi factories that dominate the landscape of Haragach Bandar in Rangpur.

Liton, 13, and the only child of a landless household, is among the 2,509 children, withdrawn from bidi factories where about 10,000 children used to work.

Liton's family was forced to look for an alternative income after his family lost land to river erosion in his village. He provided the additional income for his family by working six hours a day and seven days a week for more than one and a half years at the factory.

A local civil-society committee with some NGOs (non-governmental organisations)

came forward and initiated door-to-door advocacy to withdraw children from work at bidi factories. Liton was also helped out.

His parents came to know that working closely with tobacco leads to asthma, tuberculosis and cancer and learnt about the gains from education.

"Committee members told my parents that a friend died from cancer and that could happen to

me too. I did not want that to happen to me," Liton said.

His parents withdrew him immediately and enrolled him in the local Brac primary school. He was all smiles.

Liton's classmate, 14-year-old Monjula, also worked in a bidi factory. For her, it was a seven-year haul that began at age 6.

Depending on a single mother working at the bidi factory had

provided an inauspicious start to her life. Her mother had taken the conditions for granted: receiving Tk 15 for rolling 5,000 bidis sitting cross-legged for six hours a day and leaving her bed-ridden for three or four days.

"Both my mother and my grandfather were bidi workers and I had to go to the factories

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PHOTO: STAR

Two girls perform a dance routine at a children's primary school at Haragach Bandar in Rangpur. They were once cigarette factory workers, but left the unhealthy job for education.

Lok Sabha dissolved paving way for polls

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

President APJ Abdul Kalam yesterday dissolved Lok Sabha (the lower house of Indian Parliament), setting the stage for early general elections.

Kalam issued the proclamation about dissolution of the 545-member Lok Sabha a day after both houses of bicameral parliament were adjourned sine die after a week-long extended winter session during which the vote-on-account interim budget was passed.

The presidential notification dissolving 13th Lok Sabha more than nine months ahead of its five-year term came after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had called on Kalam Thursday night armed with the cabinet recommendation taken a few days ago regarding dissolution.

The dissolved Lok Sabha had

held 356 sessions since the house was constituted in October 1999 after general elections.

With the 13th Lok Sabha dissolved, the focus is now riveted on the country's Election Commission which gets a new head in T S Krishnamurthy replacing low-profile and soft-spoken bureaucrat James Michael Lyngdoh who retired yesterday.

There are indications that the elections could be staggered with the first phase beginning in the middle of April.

Vajpayee had said at the meeting of the top policy making forum of his Bharatiya Janata Party last month that a new government would be in place by April-end.

The main reason for the staggered polls is to facilitate the movement of adequate number of security personnel across the country to

ensure peaceful polling.

Another reason for holding the polls in mid-April is the annual school examinations in March and first week of April. Several schools in the country are used as polling booths and nearly half the polling personnel are school teachers.

The dissolution of the Lok Sabha has set off the final countdown for the elections and drawn the battle-lines between ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and Congress-led opposition.

The BJP favoured early general elections as it sought to cash in on aftermath of the impressive win in assembly polls in three states — Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh — late last year, a feel-good factor in the economy and the image of Vajpayee.

Adding to the rising poll fever,

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Militant leader among 16 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead 11 rebels, including a pro-Pakistan militant group leader, in Indian Kashmir, while suspected guerrillas killed four soldiers and beheaded a civilian, police said yesterday.

The new violence followed the deaths of 23 people Thursday across Indian Kashmir that marked the bloodiest day since Pakistan and India agreed to resume talks a month ago on all issues including the divided Himalayan territory.

Indian troops, backed by police and para-military forces, have stepped up operations against rebels active in Kashmir since the start of the year.

Counter-insurgency police early Friday shot and killed Mohammed Rafique, also known as Liddar, a senior commander of the hardline al-Umar Mujahedin guerrilla group that favours merging the Himalayan

region with Pakistan.

Rafique "was killed in a counter-insurgency operation" in downtown Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, a police spokesman said.

His death was the latest in a series of killings by Indian security forces of leading rebels, including the chief commander of the region's dominant guerrilla group, Hizbul Mujahedin, last month. He was shot after he opened fire on police when they ringed a house where he was hiding, the police spokesman said.

The group's supreme commander, Mustaq Zargar, said Rafique had served as al-Umar's operational chief commander and called his death "a big loss to us."

"We will not allow his martyrdom to go waste," Zargar told local newspapers by telephone, naming Khalid Javed as the slain commander's successor.

In another clash in a wooded area in the village of Darwas Behak, near the northern town of Bandipora, six rebels and one soldier were killed, an army spokesman said.

Two militants and three soldiers died in another clash in the southern Kashmir district of Poonch, police said.

Two other militants were killed when security forces intercepted rebels trying to sneak into Indian Kashmir across the heavily militarised Line of Control in Bimbergali in the south of Kashmir.

Officials say there have been at least half a dozen infiltration bids since the nuclear rivals began a ceasefire last November along the line dividing the region.

Meanwhile, police said suspected militants beheaded a Muslim in the central Kashmir

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New outlaw outfit in Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

A new underground political platform has been formed in Khulna styled Purba Banglar Maoist Communist Party (PBMCP) reportedly by defected cadres from outlawed Purba Banglar Communist Party's (PBCCP) M-L faction.

With formation of the new group, the number of outlawed organisations in the southwestern region has risen to 12.

A source in intelligence agency said former cadres of the PBCCP's M-L faction have shaped the new party, which posted hundreds of its posters on city walls, amidst increasing number of police patrols.

The rise of the new underground outfit has created panic among city dwellers, sources said.

Meanwhile, Khulna police yesterday arrested six outlaws including five PBCCP men from Power House intersection with 56 posters of the PBCCP.

The arrestees are Parvez, Manwarul Islam, Hasanuzzaman, Alam, Monir and Pappu, who are being questioned at Khulna Police Station.

US DEFENDS QADEER KHAN PARDON Selling N-secrets not an internal matter of Pakistan: Delhi

PTI, New Delhi

In its first official reaction to admission by Pakistan's top scientist A Q Khan of providing sensitive technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya, India yesterday said it was "not an internal matter" of Pakistan and the matter has to be debated in the IAEA and elsewhere for a "more responsible" behaviour from countries with nuclear capability.

"Obviously, there were some charges and the Pakistan Cabinet decided to recommend to President (Pervez Musharraf) that A Q Khan should be pardoned. The Pakistan president has pardoned him," External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said at a joint press conference with his British counterpart Jack Straw.

He said, "obviously, it appears to me that things will not stop here because it is not merely an internal matter of Pakistan but it is a matter concerning the entire international community. Pakistan itself is not a signatory to the NPT but Libya and Iran are."

New Delhi's reaction assumes significance in the wake of US terming the Presidential pardon to Khan as an internal matter of Pakistan.

"These are issues which will have to be debated in the IAEA and elsewhere so that we have a more responsible behaviour from countries which have nuclear capability," he said.

Reuters from Washington adds:

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'Involve more women in decision-making'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Participation of women in decision-making process is a must for proper functioning of democracy.

This was the unanimous view of delegates to the "South Asian Consultation towards Beijing + 10 Process" that began in Dhaka yesterday.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed inaugurated the two-day conference, organised by the National Coalition for Implementation of Beijing Platform for Action (NCBP), Bangladesh.

Delegates from Pakistan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are taking part in the meet.

Speakers from home representing different women's bodies demanded direct election to reserved seats for women in parliament.

Moudud said the government has just taken a preliminary decision on the issue and that there is

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