

Bihar seeks more soldiers to help flood victims

AFP, Pana

The eastern Indian state of Bihar sent an SOS message yesterday to the federal government seeking more help from the army to rescue millions of people trapped in devastating floods.

At least nine people drowned overnight, taking the death toll to 41 in the past 24 hours as 1.7 million more people were hit by the floods caused by annual monsoon rains, an official statement said.

One newspaper, however, put the death toll from flooding in Bihar, one of India's poorest states, at 219.

Over 10 million people in 16 flood-hit districts have been either displaced or trapped by the floods in Bihar, according to official figures.

A further five million people have been hit in India's northeastern Assam state and four million in neighbouring Bangladesh, according to officials.

Bihar's state government sent a message to the federal government

in New Delhi seeking more military aid in relief efforts, state chief secretary K.A.H. Subramanian said.

National Minister of Water Resources Priya Ranjan Dasmuni said the government was "addressing the crisis with all seriousness."

Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi asked for 10 billion rupees (210 million dollars) from the National Calamity Fund to tackle the crisis.

Some 300 army personnel fanned out across vast tracts of flooded land in boats to rescue trapped villagers in Bihar while at least 10 helicopters dropped packets of food and essential commodities.

In addition, more than 2,500 government and private boats were being used.

Across the region, tens of thousands of people have taken shelter on raised bamboo stilts and on mud embankments, some even on rooftops of their mud-and-straw huts, waiting to be rescued, officials said.



A woman with her daughter are rescued from floodwaters by an Indian Air Force helicopter yesterday in the flood-affected area of Darbhanga, in Bihar. The eastern Indian state of Bihar sent an SOS message to the federal government seeking more help from the army to rescue millions of people trapped in devastating floods.

US opposes UNSC seat for Germany

REUTERS, Berlin

The United States opposes Germany becoming a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a German newspaper yesterday quoted a US diplomat as saying.

"Now is not the time that Germany should apply for a permanent seat," the unnamed diplomat was quoted as telling the Financial Times Deutschland.

Germany's stints as a non-permanent member of the Security Council had been "very problematic," indeed there were "more problems than ever," the diplomats said.

Germany's push to remove immunity from prosecution in the International Criminal Court for US peacekeepers was cited as an example. The Pentagon said earlier this month it was pulling small numbers of troops out of two UN peacekeeping operations because they now can be prosecuted in the court at The Hague in the Netherlands.

Germany started openly lobbying for a permanent seat on the Security Council earlier this year.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer was given a non-committal answer from China Thursday when he tried to win its endorsement during his current Asia trip.

SHARON SAYS

Israel must quit Gaza to stay Jewish

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warned that Israel needs to withdraw from the Gaza Strip to remain "Jewish and democratic," in a speech broadcast on public radio yesterday.

"We will not be able to preserve the Jewish and democratic character of the state if we continue to rule over one million Palestinians" in the Gaza Strip, Sharon told students at Israel's Academy of War late Thursday.

The argument is the strongest put forward yet by the hawkish, right-wing prime minister for his plan to evacuate troops and Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip by the end of 2005.

"We can't ignore (Israel's) demographic concerns," Sharon said, in reference to the Palestinians' higher birthrate.

According to official projections, by 2010 Israel's 5.2 million-strong Jewish population will be overtaken by that of the West Bank and Gaza, together home to more than three million Palestinians, and the Jewish state's own Arab citizens.

Sharon also stressed that Israel

must give up the Gaza Strip to consolidate its presence in settlements on the West Bank.

The premier won his government's formal backing last month to dismantle all 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and another four in the northern West Bank.

Sharon, however, lost the government's parliamentary majority after he fired two ministers opposed to the Gaza pullout, and a third left his government in protest at the plan.

The planned withdrawal will uproot some 7,500 Gaza settlers and no more than 400 from the 220,000-strong West Bank settler population.

"Whomever believes that we can hold on to Netzarim (south of Gaza City) and Maale Adumim (on the West Bank, east of Jerusalem) will end up losing both," Sharon warned.

Israel's media noted Friday that Sharon's new argument for evacuating Gaza is typically used by the center-left opposition Labor party which the premier recently invited to form a national union government.

Labor officials nevertheless expressed impatience with Sharon's handling of negotiations concern-

ing their participation in a new government.

They protested Friday the subsequent invitations the premier had extended to two small ultra-religious parties instead of reaching an agreement with Labor first.

"Sharon is making a joke out of the Labor party," MP Ofer Pines told the English-language Jerusalem Post.

"If Sharon wants Labor, the Likud negotiating team should meet first with Labor and reach guidelines on a new coalition that can be used as the basis for bringing in other factions," he said.

Meanwhile, Israel braced for a tough battle at the UN General Assembly which was set Friday to start debating a resolution after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) condemned of the West Bank barrier.

"We will have to wage a very tough battle when faced by the immoral majority that Muslim and Arab countries as well as several other undemocratic states enjoy at the General Assembly," Israel's UN ambassador, Dan Gitterman, told state radio.

US House votes to block aid for Saudi Arabia

Bid to cut military aid to Egypt rejected

REUTERS, Washington

Lawmakers cheered as the House of Representatives voted on Thursday to strip financial assistance for Saudi Arabia from a foreign aid bill because of criticism that the country has not been sufficiently cooperative in the US war on terror.

The vote was a stinging defeat for the Bush Administration, which had strongly opposed the measure saying it would "severely undermine" counterterrorism cooperation with Saudi Arabia and US efforts for peace in the Middle East.

The House voted 217-191 to remove \$25,000 in the \$19.4 billion 2005 foreign aid bill earmarked for Saudi Arabia.

The funds were designated for military training but approval would

have triggered millions of dollars in discounts on hardware and other military training, lawmakers said.

"I don't want my taxpayer dollars going to the Saudis and I don't want anyone else's to," said Nevada Democratic Rep. Shelley Berkley.

Supporters of the measure also argued that with Saudi Arabia's massive wealth from ownership of one-fourth of the world's proven oil reserves, the kingdom should not need financial aid from the United States.

The Senate would also have to strip the Saudi aid from its version of the foreign assistance bill before it stands a chance of being enacted.

US-Saudi ties were shaken by the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers in the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001 were Saudi nationals and revelations that individual Saudis had financed al-Qaeda, whose leader, Osama bin Laden, was born in the kingdom.

A study by the Council on Foreign Relations found recently that Saudi Arabia has stepped up its efforts to halt the flow of funds to militant groups, but said more needed to be done.

AFP adds: The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly defeated an amendment to the foreign aid bill for fiscal 2005 that would have switched 570 million dollars in military aid for Egypt to economic aid for the same country.

Proposed by Democratic Representative for California Tom Lantos, the amendment was rejected Wednesday by a 287 to 131 vote, according to congressional records.

TROOP PULLOUT FROM IRAQ

Kerry fleshes out blueprint

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry said he would set three conditions for withdrawing US troops from Iraq if he were elected, and warned that President George W. Bush might cut troop numbers at the end of the November 2 vote.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, Kerry said the conditions were "to measure the level of stability" in Iraq, "to measure the outlook for the stability to hold" and "to measure the ability... of their security forces" to defend Iraq.

Until each condition is satisfied, Kerry said, "I will provide for the world's need not to have a failed state in Iraq."

Kerry, who will be formally picked to run for the White House at the Democratic National Convention in Boston July 26-29, has been calling for more international involvement in Iraq.

Convention in Boston July 26-29, has been calling for more international involvement in Iraq, but has refrained from advocating a withdrawal of all the 140,000 US troops.

However, he told the Journal aboard his campaign plane that "at the end of my first term I would consider it a failure of my diplomacy if we haven't reduced the number significantly."

"I certainly can't tell you numbers," he added. "The key at this point is to have a stable, non-failed state that is moving toward democracy and has security sufficient for the government to stand on its own."

Kerry said he had "heard it said by many people" that Bush might be preparing to withdraw some troops from Iraq before the election, adding that he was prepared for anything.

More anguish for Blair Labour party loses crucial by-polls

AFP, London

Under-fire British Prime Minister Tony Blair received another unwelcome reminder of his falling popularity yesterday as his Labour party lost a formerly safe parliamentary seat and only narrowly retained another in a pair of by-elections.

Labour lost Leicester South, which it had held almost without break for the past five decades, to a candidate from the vehemently anti-Iraq war Liberal Democrat party.

Shortly beforehand it was announced that Labour had narrowly squeaked through in a parallel poll in the nearby city of Birmingham, also central England.

However, there, Labour's majority of almost 12,000 votes in the last general election of 2001 was shaved

to less than 500, a massive 26-percent vote swing away from the party.

The twin polls -- sparked by the death of one MP and the departure of another for a top job in Europe -- had been billed as a plebiscite on Blair's rule, and especially his support for the US-led war in Iraq.

But victorious Liberal Democrat candidate Parmjit Singh Gill said his local population, more than a third of whom are of South Asian origin, had other ideas.

"Yesterday, Lord Butler gave his views on Tony Blair's reasoning for backing the invasion of Iraq. Today, people in Leicester have given their thumbs up," Gill said after the result was announced.

Blair argued that the war to remove Saddam Hussein was necessary almost entirely on the basis that Baghdad posed a direct threat to the West, and its popularity slumped after no WMDs came to light after the war.

'US to work closely with India, Pakistan'

PTI, Washington

"We defend the peace and extend the peace and we work with our friends in South Asia," he said.

Recalling that two years ago he was "worried to death" that there a major war may break out between India and Pakistan, he said the United States got deeply engaged, along with other members of the international community, working with the Pakistanis and the Indians.

"And now we see them working together, having meetings among themselves, having soccer matches with each other, working on issues that would have been too difficult to even imagine just a year and a half, two years ago. That is part of our policy of defending the peace and extending the peace throughout the world," he said.

US nuclear lab loses secret data

BBC ONLINE

One of America's largest nuclear weapons research laboratories has suspended its activities after secret information went missing.

Officials are not saying what data has disappeared from the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, but it is thought to be highly sensitive.

The laboratory was temporarily closed four years ago as forest fires got dangerously close to it.

Several security breaches have hit the birthplace of the first atomic bomb.

Its closure comes on the anniversary of the first atomic bomb test in Alamogordo, New Mexico.

Its head, John Browne, resigned in January last year, following allegations of theft and fraud, including allegedly questionable purchases and the disappearance of computers and other equipment from the complex.

A few months later, the US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) was instructed by the government to make "aggressive and far-reaching" changes to tighten security at all nuclear weapons laboratories in the US.

New US law gets tough on theft of identity

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush signed legislation on Thursday that toughens penalties against identity theft, a problem that federal officials estimate cost US consumers and businesses over \$50 billion last year.

In a White House Roosevelt Room ceremony, Bush put his signature on the Identity Theft Penalty Enhancement Act, which he said "sends a clear message that a person who violates another's financial privacy will be punished."

The Federal Trade Commission has said it received more than half a million consumer complaints in 2003 as scam artists financed their spending sprees with other people's credit cards and hucksters sold nonexistent products through online auction sites like eBay Inc.

'New Iraqi prison abuse cases uncovered'

AFP, Washington

New cases of alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers have been uncovered, a US senator said Thursday, three months after US media broadcast photos of detainees being sexually humiliated at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

"We're still uncovering, as late as this morning, other incidents, other cases that will be promptly investigated by the Department of Defense," Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner said after his panel was briefed by Pentagon officials in a closed-door meeting.

Warner, a Virginia Republican, said there were possible violations of the Geneva Convention and

Defence Department rules and regulations on prisoners.

However, a Republican congressional source speaking on condition of anonymity said the Pentagon was "dragging its feet and intends to postpone any hearing until after" the November 2 presidential election.

"There's a lot of frustration over here," said the source.

Warner said the Pentagon officials briefing the committee also showed the senators 24 confidential documents from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The papers are part of an ICRC report on prisoner treatment in Iraqi jails written before the scandal broke in April, when US media released photos of abuse committed at Abu Ghraib.

AIDS meet ends with calls for cash

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AFP, Bangkok

The leaders of the world's fight against AIDS called for renewed political and financial impetus to counter its inexorable march yesterday as they expressed their shame that 38 million people were still living with HIV.

In a blunt appraisal of work so far, a coalition of leaders at the closing ceremony of the world AIDS forum said failure and inaction had contributed to the 20 million AIDS deaths since the early 1980s and vowed to step up the fight against the disease.

"We are ashamed that in 2004 some 38 million people are living with HIV/AIDS and fighting the same battles after two decades," said the Bangkok Leadership statement at the end of the six-day conference in the Thai capital.

"Despite all that we have learned about what works in prevention and treatment, the epidemic is on the rise in every region."

"We recognise that we have not done enough to protect people from new infections. We have not done enough to provide access to affordable treatment and care to all those who need it."

The communiqué was drafted under the patronage of Graca Machel, the wife of former South African president Nelson Mandela, in the name of health ministers and representatives from churches, youth groups, women's organisations and armed forces who took part in the conference.

The six-day forum has been marked by rows over funding and the commitment of key world leaders in combating the epidemic that now threatens Asia and Eastern Europe with a similar disaster that has hit sub-Saharan Africa.

In a colourful closing ceremony in the Thai capital, Mandela and India's ruling Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi headed a cast of high-ranking politicians and activists calling for unity, and hard cash, to tackle the epidemic.

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"We recognise that we have not done enough to protect people from new infections. We have not done enough to provide access to affordable treatment and care to all those who need it."