

Hurricane pounds Florida again

One million without power

AFP, West Palm Beach

Hurricane Jeanne battered southeastern Florida for hours yesterday, tearing off roofs and felling trees and power lines after slamming ashore at the same spot Frances did three weeks ago.

The fourth hurricane to pummel the southeastern state in six weeks, Jeanne knocked out power to over a million people along the Atlantic coast. Numerous telephone outages also were reported.

The ferocious winds that started lashing the coast Saturday evening reportedly overturned several vehicles and blew a car off a bridge.

The eye of the hurricane made landfall just before midnight (0400 GMT Sunday) at Hutchinson Island, 64 kilometers (40 miles) north of Palm Beach.

It then headed inland and weakened one notch from a category three hurricane.

But authorities warned the

storm-weary southeastern US state was not out of the woods yet, issuing a hurricane warning for coastal areas of western Florida that were expected to get hit in the afternoon.

A deceptive calm fell over some areas as the eye of the storm moved inland while communities just kilometers (miles) away were whipped by sideways driving rain and 160-kilometer (100-mile) per-hour wind gusts.

The fierce hurricane, which packed winds of 193 kilometers (120 miles) per hour at landfall, tore roofs off houses, uprooted trees and knocked down power lines, which in some cases had just been repaired after the passage of the last ferocious storm.

Eerie green flashes lit up the night sky at intervals as transformers blew out, cutting electricity for yet more residents of the storm-weary state.

Frantic callers telephoned radio stations and emergency services to

say their houses were coming apart, while hundreds of thousands of people in southern Florida yet again lost power, leaving them to sweat out the storm in steamy heat.

Authorities waited for winds to abate and daylight to arrive to assess the damage wrought by Frances, the same storm that last week devastated northern Haiti, leaving some 1,300 people confirmed dead and hundreds more missing and feared dead.

Forecasters warned of tornadoes and said the swirling northern edge of the eye of the storm had pushed four to seven feet (1.2 to 2.1 meters) of ocean water onto land as torrential rain poured yet more water onto already saturated ground.

Three million people had been told to evacuate before the storm bore down on southern Florida, where emergency crews have been struggling to repair the damage wrought by the earlier, deadly hurricanes.

US worried at signs of N Korean missile test

REUTERS, Yokota Air Base

Signs that North Korea is preparing to test a ballistic missile are of great concern, a US commander said yesterday, adding that the North could be on the verge of big missile technology breakthroughs.

The United States believes North Korea already has one or two nuclear weapons and it is known to have missiles that can reach parts of the United States, as well as most of Asia.

"We all remember that in 1998 they fired that missile that went across the northern part of Japan ... and landed out in the Pacific Ocean," US Pacific Air Forces Commander Gen. Paul V. Hester told reporters, referring to a North Korean missile test.

"So that is of great concern to this area of the Pacific, and ... it's of great concern to our friends in Japan," Hester said of indications the North was preparing a fresh test.

Delhi to probe all scams of NDA regime

PTI, Lucknow

The UPA Government would investigate scams that had allegedly taken place during the previous NDA regime, Union Urban Development Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad said on Sunday.

"The issues that were raised in Parliament by the Congress and other UPA allies will be taken to their logical conclusion," Azad told reporters Lucknow.

He alleged that the previous regime had demolished 1025 CPWD flats and houses on Government land worth Rs 3,500 crore and distributed it to RSS and its sister organisations.

The market price of the land is over Rs 10 thousand crore, he claimed.

Brushing aside the issue of tainted ministers in the UPA Government, Azad said that the charges against some ministers were "like peanuts when compared to the corrupt deeds of the NDA regime."

"I would urge your excellency to commence talks with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)," UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said in a letter to Kumaratunga, a copy of which was released to news



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi doctor carries a wounded boy into an ambulance at the restive city of Fallujah to be transferred to another hospital yesterday. The boy was one of the victims of US air strikes carried out on late Saturday on suspected hideouts of a militant group in Fallujah. At least 15 people were killed and 33 others were injured in the raids.

Taliban commander killed in Afghan raid

AP, Kandahar

Afghan security forces killed a senior Taliban commander and two of his comrades in a raid in southern Afghanistan, an official said yesterday.

Maulvi Abdul Ghaffar, reportedly a former inmate at the US prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, died in a gunbattle Saturday night in Pishi, a village in the southern province of Uruzgan, said Jan Mohammed Khan, governor of Uruzgan.

Khan said authorities had received intelligence that Ghaffar was hiding in the village and was planning an attack on the government. Security forces surrounded then raided the house, and three men, including Ghaffar, were killed in gunfire. No one else was hurt.

The governor said Ghaffar had been a senior Taliban commander in northern Afghanistan and was arrested about two months after the US-led coalition drove the militia out of power in late 2001.

4 suspects held in London after 'dirty bomb' report

AFP, London

Police arrested four men in London Saturday under Britain's anti-terrorist law, as a Sunday newspaper claimed it had infiltrated a gang trying to buy radioactive material for a "dirty bomb."

The Metropolitan Police said the four men -- arrested under the Terrorism Act 2001 -- had been taken into custody at a central London police station "for further questioning."

"Several addresses have been searched," a police spokesman said. "Some searches continue."

All four men -- whose names were not released -- were detained under section 41 of the Terrorism Act, which refers to "the (suspected) commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism."

The News of the World said it cooperated with police after it infiltrated a gang that claimed to be looking for radioactive material on behalf of a Saudi "described as sympathetic to 'the Muslim cause.'

Lanka under pressure to open talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

agencies Sunday.

"When the discussions get underway and substantive issues arise, the establishment of a National Advisory Council for peace and reconciliation will be timely and productive and my party will be eager to participate vigorously in the deliberations of the proposed council at that time."

Kumaratunga had proposed the council to seek opinion from all political parties on conducting talks with the Tigers.

She dismissed the government of Wickremesinghe in February after accusing him of making too many concessions to the Tigers and her Marxist-backed party went on to narrowly win snap elections held in April.

Any settlement with the Tigers would need the rewriting of the constitution, a move that needs two-thirds backing in the legislature.

Kumaratunga's party would have to depend on opposition support to achieve it.

However, her administration has failed to open talks with the Tigers. Negotiations have been suspended since April 2003 when the Tigers pulled out. Diplomatic efforts since then to revive the process remain inconclusive.

Kumaratunga told the UN General Assembly last week the Tigers were refusing to resume negotiations aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

The Tigers and government forces have been observing a truce since February 2002. But Kumaratunga has accused the Tigers of attacking rivals and killing more than 250 people despite the ceasefire.

US soldier gets 25 years jail for Iraqi killing

REUTERS, Baghdad

A US soldier has been sentenced to 25 years in jail for the murder of an Iraqi National Guard soldier near Tikrit in May, the US military said in a statement yesterday.

"Specialist Federico Merida pled guilty to murder and making false official statements during court martial proceedings," the statement said.

He was also handed a dishonorable discharge and reduced in rank to private, the statement said.

In a separate case last week the US military said two soldiers in Baghdad were under investigation for premeditated murder in the wrongful deaths of three Iraqis. It gave no further details.

The Iraqi National Guard is part of security forces being trained by US-led forces to eventually take control of the country.

Manmohan wraps up 'highly successful' visit to US, UK

PTI, New Delhi

officials said.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday headed for Geneva on way back home wrapping up a "highly successful" visit to Britain and the US.

He has effectively conveyed to President George W Bush and world leaders that India's role is vital to address pressing challenges of terrorism and UN reforms, while making it clear that economic reforms in India were irreversible.

Singh's first major diplomatic foray outside Asia after assuming office was described by top officials as "very productive".

As was expected, his meeting with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf hogged the limelight.

The two leaders appeared to have struck a good chemistry and had candid exchange of views, the

two leaders agreed that "possible options" should be explored for a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Kashmir issue in a sincere spirit and purposeful manner.



PHOTO: AFP

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) shakes hands with Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Morshed Khan prior to a meeting on Sept 24 at the United Nations in New York City. They discussed world issues at the sideline of the 59th United Nations General Assembly session..

US detains Iraqi guard commander for links with insurgents

AFP, Baghdad

US military announced yesterday it had detained a senior Iraqi national guard commander in eastern Iraq over suspected links with insurgents.

Talib Abd Ghayib al-Lahibi was detained on September 23 "for having associations with known insurgents," a statement said.

Lahibi led national guardmen providing security in the eastern province of Diyala and commanded three battalions, considered to be among the most efficient in the fledgling national security apparatus, it added.

The statement said Lahibi served as a commander during the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war and led troops in the northern city of Mosul during the March 2003 US-led invasion that toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein.

The US military has stepped up recruitment and training for the national guard as it increasingly counts on the Iraqi force for operations against the insurgency in the country's hotspots.

Since the United States declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq in May 2003, countless instances of Iraqi security forces involvement in anti-coalition attacks have been reported.

Analysts said the debates, which date back to 1960, were not usually "make-or-break" affairs except for a few occasions where a major gaffe or stylistic flaw by one of the candidates helped turn a tight race.

But this year's sessions were particularly key for Kerry, the veteran Massachusetts senator who is trailing Bush in the polls and still struggling to get his message across before the November 2 ballot.

"It's always more important for the challenger because he has to pass over the threshold that establishes you're an acceptable leader," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

Aides said Kerry would seek to demonstrate his strength, knowledge and commitment to battling terrorism and attack Bush's credibility on the turmoil in Iraq and homeland security since the September 11 trauma.

Bush, Kerry prepare for crucial debate

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush and Democratic challenger John Kerry hit the books this week for the first of three crucial debates that could decide the most heated White House race in recent history.

They were to square off on foreign policy and homeland security at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida before tens of millions of television viewers less than five weeks before the election.

The 90-minute debate will be their first head-to-head meeting in the campaign marked by increasingly bitter exchanges, particularly over Iraq and the war on terror launched by the September 11, 2001 attacks.

It will follow an emotional round of stumping with Kerry accusing Bush of "stubborn incompetence" in dealing with the terrorist threat and the president seeking to paint his rival as waffling, defeatist and even unpatriotic.

Polls show voter interest in the debates at its highest point since Bush's father and Bill Clinton drew an average 67 million viewers in three sessions in 1992 credited with helping to turn the outcome the Democrat's way.

More than a quarter of voters believe this year's debates could affect their choice, according to



PHOTO: AFP

Syrian firefighters and security men remove the wrecked car of Palestinian Ezzeddine Sobhi Sheikh Khalil of the radical group Hamas that exploded yesterday in Damascus. Sheikh Khalil, who was expelled by Israeli occupation forces to Lebanon during the first Intifada, was killed in the explosion and three other people were wounded.

Bomb kills Hamas leader

REUTERS, Damascus

An official from the Palestinian militant group Hamas was killed yesterday when a bomb exploded in his car in Damascus, Hamas spokesmen and witnesses said.

Izz el-Deen al-Sheikh Khalil died when an explosive charge placed under the driver's seat ripped through his SUV car in the Az-Zahra neighborhood of the Syrian capital shortly after 11:30 a.m.

A spokesman for the militant Palestinian group in Gaza said the killing was "a cowardly crime by the Zionist Mossad," Israel's intelligence agency.

Israeli officials declined comment on possible Israeli involvement. "Some people lead dangerous lives," one of the Israeli officials said.

The bomb appeared to have been hidden under the driver's seat of Khalil's car and went off shortly after he started the engine, witnesses said. Blood was splattered on the back seat.

The blast shattered some windows in the surrounding high-rise buildings and a nearby car was also damaged in the blast.

Israeli security officials had said the military would answer twin bus bombings that killed 16 people in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba on Aug. 31 with a renewed assassination campaign against Hamas leaders in the Palestinian territories and abroad.