

# Rescuers scrabble ruins for quake survivors

Red Cross fears at least 1000 dead; Bad weather hampers rescue work; Int'l help begins to arrive

AGENCIES, Nias

Dazed survivors on the Indonesian island of Nias were scrabbling through rubble in the hunt for relatives and friends crushed when a massive earthquake struck, killing hundreds of people.

The stench of death hung over the popular surfing destination off the west coast of Sumatra while clouds and rain hampered helicopters bringing emergency supplies to Nias and other islands close to the epicenter of the 8.7-magnitude quake.

"There are still a lot of victims under the ruins," said Nias deputy chief Agus Mendrofa, adding that a lack of earth moving equipment meant it was difficult to search survivors.

Mendrofa, the deputy district chief of Nias, one of the Sumatra coast islands worst affected said the death toll there was expected to reach at least 500 as rescuers struggled.

"People are vying with each other, demanding that their houses be worked on first, because they say they still have relatives there," Mendrofa told Jakarta's Elshinta radio.

The Indonesian Red Cross says it estimates at least 1,000 people have died in the disaster, which came three months after the December 26 earthquake and tsunami hit the same area, leaving 220,000 Indonesians missing and



PHOTO: AFP

Residents pass by collapsed buildings in Gunung Sitoli, on Nias island yesterday following the 8.7 magnitude tremor that hit shortly before midnight two days ago. Rescuers estimate that the huge earthquake may have claimed at least 1,000 lives.

dead.

Officials say as yet, only a few hundred people have been confirmed dead on Nias and the neighbouring island of Simeulue, while fears are growing for the smaller Banyak isles, home to 10,000 people, from which there has been

no word.

With the main airport knocked out of commission by the earthquake and a shortage of fuel for vehicles, a helicopter landing site has been set up on a soccer field in the centre of the main town of Gunung Sitoli.

Bodies of the dead lay in rows on the pitch, where an emergency triage centre has been set up, offering treatment for the injured and evacuation for those in need of major medical attention.

Corpses were also lined up outside the city's Binala Dharma

Buddhist temple, which has become another makeshift collection point for the dead.

Elsewhere in the city, where hundreds of two-storey buildings lay in crumpled ruin. Residents, their faces emotionless with shock, hunted for loved ones.

In one place, crowds gathered round a lifeless limb protruding from rubble.

With no power on the island, many survivors spent their second night since the earthquake covering in the darkness, crammed into the buildings that survived. A government office with its own generator is being used by dozens of people to charge mobile phones to stay in touch with the outside world.

"There are many bodies believed to be still trapped under ruins of buildings and we need heavy machinery to be able to retrieve them," said Mulya Hasjmi, a health official in Aceh, the Sumatra island province that includes Simeulue.

A reporter of the state Antara news agency in Simeulue said that at least 200 private and public buildings, including the general hospital and the district office in the main town of Sinabang, had collapsed.

A coordinator for UN aid operations said bad weather grounded Chinook heavy-lifting helicopters ferrying machinery and supplies from the Sumatra port of Sibolga for several hours, but that flights began later in the day.

As the aid arrived, about 500 people tried to storm the district chief's residence in Nias' main town of Gunung Sitoli, where three trucks loaded with essential food supplies were parked, Elshinta radio reported.

Before security officers restored order, several people carried away some cardboard boxes, the report said, playing a recording from the incident in which a woman was heard yelling: "Don't wait for too long, do not let us starve."

Indonesia's National Coordinating Agency for Disaster and Refugee Handling said the government had mobilised three helicopters, five light aircraft and three navy ships to transport relief, troops and volunteers and evacuate the sick and wounded.

Foreign troops and aid workers who had only just left Indonesia's tsunami disaster zone were Wednesday rushing back to help stricken victims of the latest earthquake as countries around the world rallied for a second emergency relief operation.

The Australian military, returning home after providing aid to victims of the December 26 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia's Aceh province, has been remobilised following Monday's 8.7-magnitude quake which devastated the neighbouring islands of Nias and Simeulue off western Sumatra.

Japan offered to send more troops to the region, Singapore

dispatched military helicopters and a team of medical and rescue workers to Nias, and the United States offered military logistical support.

Japan and the US had yet to make deployments in the absence of a request from Jakarta for military help, a potentially thorny issue after Indonesia had at one stage urged foreign troops to leave tsunami-hit Aceh by March 26—two days before the latest quake struck.

Oxfam International said it had sent an assessment team to Nias island by helicopter from the regional Indonesian capital Banda Aceh to size up the scale of the disaster.

Malaysia also sent C-130 transport planes loaded with equipment to help with the rescue effort, but with the main airport in Nias knocked out of commission for most larger planes, there was no way of landing the aircraft.

China's government said it would donate 500,000 US dollars in cash to Indonesia, while its Red Cross pledged 300,000 dollars. Canada, Germany and South Africa were among other nations pledging aid.

The United States deployed 16,000 military personnel, 26 ships, 58 helicopters and 43 fixed wing aircraft in the relief and recovery effort, the majority in Indonesia's Aceh province.

Safe and alive under ruins after 39 hours of quake

AFP, Nias

French firefighters on Wednesday rescued a woman trapped for 39 hours under the rubble of a building destroyed when a massive earthquake hit the Indonesian island of Nias.

Christian Lantonnet of Pompiers sans Frontieres, or Firefighters Without Borders, said the woman was pulled out after his team found her while searching through ruins where other survivors said someone might be buried.

"We succeeded to rescue from the rubble of a house, a victim alive at around 2:00 pm," Lantonnet told AFP.

The 8.7-magnitude quake struck shortly after 11pm on Monday, causing major damage on Nias and other nearby islands off the coast of Sumatra, and leaving hundreds dead.

"She was very weak and was rushed to the hospital," he said.

Lantonnet said his five-man team had arrived on the island on Tuesday, flying in from nearby Aceh province where they had been helping survivors of the December 26 tsunami, which caused massive damage there.

He said a second team was expected to arrive on Thursday with sniffer dogs to search for people still buried.

## Can a kiss kill? It can in Cairo

PTI, Cairo

An Egyptian stabbed a Hungarian man and woman, slightly wounding them, after the couple kissed while pausing for a photograph near a mosque at Cairo's popular tourist bazaar, police said.

Hesham Mohammed, 36, apparently was upset by the kiss in front of Al-Hussein Mosque, a security official said on Tuesday on customary condition of anonymity.

The mosque is adjacent to the Khan el-Khalili market where foreign tourists flock to buy souvenirs and locally made crafts.

The Hungarians, who were not identified, were treated at a nearby hospital for minor wounds, the official said, and Mohammed was being questioned.

He was described as unemployed and suffering from severe depression.

## US memo shows Iraq jail methods

The measures had gone beyond acceptable: ACLU

BBC ONLINE

The top US general in Iraq authorised interrogation techniques including the use of dogs, stress positions and disorientation, a memo has shown. The document was obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union through the US Freedom of Information Act.

The September 2003 document is signed by the then commander of US forces in Iraq, Gen Ricardo Sanchez. The ACLU says the measures go beyond generally accepted practice and says Gen Sanchez should be made accountable.

The memo authorised techniques including putting prisoners in stressful positions, using loud music and light control, and changing sleeping patterns.

It also authorised the presence of muzzled military working dogs to, as the memo puts it, "exploit Arab fear of dogs while maintaining security during interrogations".

The presence of dogs and other measures, all of which required approval by Gen Sanchez, were rescinded a month later because of opposition from military lawyers.

Gen Sanchez says advance permission was required every time one of these techniques was

requested, adding that he never gave such permission.

The Pentagon originally refused to release the memo on national security grounds, but passed it to the ACLU on Friday after the union challenged it in court under the Freedom of Information Act.

The ACLU says at least 12 of the 29 techniques listed in the document went far beyond limits established by the army's field manual.

"Gen Sanchez authorised interrogation techniques that were in clear violation of the Geneva Conventions and the army's own standards," ACLU lawyer Amrit Singh said in the union's statement.

## Syria vows full withdrawal from Lebanon before elections

AFP, United Nations

Syria said it would withdraw all its forces from Lebanon before Lebanese elections set for May, a move that could spell an end to the longtime Syrian dominance of the country.

Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara made the vow in a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which also angrily rejected a UN report last week on the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Shara outlined "the full withdrawal of those forces, which it will undertake before the next election in Lebanon," according to AFP's translation of the Arabic original.

Syrian UN ambassador Fayssal Mekdad said that Damascus was "definitely" committed to the pull-out of the troops, first sent during Lebanon's brutal 1975-1990 civil war, with a timetable to be set in the coming days.

"When we entered into Lebanon, we entered to stop the civil war, to stop the division of the people, to stop the killing. These are issues that during the past many years we have achieved," Mekdad told AFP.

## Pakistan refuses US access to AQ Khan

PTI, Washington

Pakistan rejected US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's request to allow Americans to question disgraced scientist AQ Khan over his alleged role in Iran's nuclear programme, a report said in Washington on Tuesday.

Rice, who was in Pakistan last week, requested direct American access to Khan "so that the US intelligence community could ask him about his nuclear handwork in Iran."

"But all she obtained was permission to submit a list of questions to Khan," The Washington Times said.

It also said that both the US and Israel "have contingency plans to launch air strikes against Iran's 12 to 15 nuclear sites, most of them underground."

## Iran allows journalists inside key nuke plant

REUTERS, Natanz

Iran allowed journalists for the first time on Wednesday into part of a nuclear plant which Washington and the European Union want permanently closed and which until late 2002 was a closely guarded secret.

The visit by about 30 local and foreign journalists to the Natanz uranium enrichment facility, 150 miles south of Tehran, reflected an unusual degree of openness by the Islamic state.

Iran says its nuclear program is nothing for the world to fear and will only be used to generate much-needed electricity.

But Washington and the EU fear Iran could use its nuclear plants to produce bombs and have raised particular concerns that Natanz could be used to make bomb-grade fuel.

Approaching the 1,110-acre site ringed by arid mountains, journalists counted at least 10 anti-aircraft batteries, parts of which have been built deep underground as protection from aerial attack.

At the heavily guarded main gate there were no signs to indicate the

nature of the sprawling site whose existence was first revealed by an Iranian exile group in late 2002, prompting international concern about Iran's atomic ambitions.

Inspectors from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency first visited Natanz in early 2003 and have since sealed the main operational areas to prevent further work as part of an agreement between Iran and the EU.

The EU wants Iran to permanently scrap Natanz and other nuclear fuel work in return for assistance with developing nuclear energy and other economic and security cooperation.

Iran says the suspension of nuclear fuel work is a temporary confidence-building measure and that it will never give up its program completely.

Iranian officials said the facility contained a nearly completed test enrichment plant and a larger, main enrichment facility where work is in preliminary stages.

The Natanz visit was arranged by Iran's presidential office.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian traders shout anti-government slogans at a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday to mark their protest against the proposed Value Added Tax (VAT) which is scheduled to come into effect April 1. Traders, fuel pumps and businesses across India pulled down their shutters to protest the new VAT.

## US dollar facing collapse, warns Mahathir

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The US dollar is facing an imminent collapse and the global economy will suffer a "catastrophe" when it is rejected as the currency for trade, former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad said in remarks published Wednesday.

Mahathir, who famously ignored International Monetary Fund (IMF) advice and instead chose to peg his country's ringgit to the US dollar during the Asian financial crisis, said a standard gold currency was now the best alternative for world trade.

The dollar was retaining some value because of fears of a global economic catastrophe if it was rejected, he told a conference of some 650 chief executives from 30 countries on Borneo island Tuesday. The Star newspaper reported.

## Rebels call cross-border Kashmir bus a 'coffin'

AFP, Srinagar

Islamic militants Wednesday warned Kashmiris to shun a bus service between the two zones of divided Kashmir scheduled to start April 7, describing the vehicle as a "coffin".

Four guerrilla groups said in a joint statement that those planning to ride the bus would face the consequences of being branded "traitors" by anti-Indian rebels.

"We humbly request persons selected to travel on the first and second bus to Muzaffarabad not to enter the coffin but if they do, they will find their names in the list of traitors," the groups said in the statement faxed to journalists in Srinagar.

Civilians are periodically killed in Kashmir by rebels who accuse them of collaborating with India's security forces or for ignoring the dictates of the dozen-odd militant groups

fighting against Indian rule in the divided region.

The statement, issued by the al-Nasireen, Save Kashmir Movement, Farzandan-e-Millat and al-Arifeen groups, was accompanied by the list of 40 people, complete with residential addresses, selected to travel on the maiden service.

They also called for a general strike in Indian Kashmir on April 7 when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is scheduled to launch the service.

The bus between the Indian and Pakistani zones of the disputed region has been hailed not only as a historic boost to peace between the two nuclear rivals but also as a way of reuniting families divided for nearly six decades.

## Blind Australian set to climb Everest

AFP, Sydney

Gerrard Gosens has spent the past two years preparing to climb the world's tallest peak, undaunted by the fact that he won't be able to see the view when he reaches the top.

Gosens, 35, is aiming to become the first blind man to reach the mountain's summit when he leaves Australia Friday for Nepal.

The Brisbane father of two, who works with the Royal Blind Foundation in Queensland state, said he was motivated by his family and inspired by a blind friend, Ched Towns, who had



Gerrard Gosens in Brisbane yesterday.

hoped to climb Everest but died on a neighbouring mountain from altitude sickness in 2000.

Gosens said that while his wife was "fairly anxious" about his attempting to climb one of the world's most dangerous peaks, he was keen to make the trip to prove to his daughter, who is almost totally blind, that she need not let her condition limit her outlook on life.

Gosens, who was born without irises and who also has glaucoma, will be assisted by two Sherpas in a climbing team of about 12.