

Five killed by flash floods in Afghanistan

AFP, Khost

Severe flooding caused by torrential rains in southeastern Afghanistan left five people dead and washed away scores of homes, officials said Thursday.

"The bodies of four men and a woman were found in Ismail Khail district," Mohammed Zaman, deputy police chief of Khost province, told AFP, adding that only one had been identified.

"Thirty-six people were caught in a little island in the middle of a river and had to spend the night there. They were rescued Thursday morning," he added.

Khost authorities said the floods claimed lives and caused damage because many trees on nearby mountains had been chopped down for fire wood.

In mid-June flash floods and storms left 48 dead as they swept 12 provinces in northeastern, northern and eastern Afghanistan.

Bodies recovered from Chinook crash site

AGENCIES, Kabul

US military officials in Afghanistan say 13 bodies have been recovered from the site where one of their Chinook helicopters crashed on Tuesday. Another seven soldiers are unaccounted for, some of them soldiers who were fighting on the ground.

The Taliban say they shot the Chinook down. The US concedes that "hostile fire" may have been the cause.

The Chinook was taking the soldiers to join operations against militants in the eastern province of Konar. Officials say there is still hope that some of those unaccounted for are alive.

US forces have been engaged in a number of operations in south-east Afghanistan against Taliban and al-Qaeda militants and their allies opposed to the Kabul govern-

ment.

If the reports of hostile fire are confirmed, the Chinook would be the first US helicopter to be downed in such a way in Afghanistan.

US troops reached the crash site in a remote mountain valley late on Wednesday night. Bad weather had hampered the search which has been further complicated by the high altitude of the crash site.

Officials say the rugged mountain terrain had made it difficult for the rescue team to access the area.

A man who said he spoke for the Taliban phoned two international news agencies in Afghanistan with similar claims.

The incident came amid an escalating insurgency by the Taliban ahead of Afghanistan's landmark parliamentary and legislative elections in September.

More than 500 people, most of them militants, have died since the

Taliban launched the offensive at the beginning of the year.

Such wave of Taliban violence culminating in the crash of a US helicopter probably hit by ground fire has brought Afghanistan to the verge of chaos and could compromise American operations in Iraq, analysts say.

Analysts said that if the United States could not defend its high-tech hardware against grassroots Taliban insurgents, questions would be raised about its ability to guarantee security ahead of landmark parliamentary polls in September.

"It is obvious the US military's campaign to eliminate or weaken the Taliban has significantly failed," said Riffat Hussain, an expert on Afghan affairs at Quaid-e-Azam University in the Pakistani capital Islamabad.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Afghan militiamen wait their turn to hand over their weapons during a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program in Kabul yesterday. The UN-backed DDR program which started in October 2003 is aimed at disarming militiamen and entered its second phase to collect number of illegal arms ahead of September's parliamentary elections.

Fugitive 'hero' surrenders in Indian court

AFP, New Delhi

A former Indian bureaucrat, named an "Asian hero" by Time magazine for his handling of flood relief in impoverished Bihar state, surrendered to a court Thursday after being on the run for over a month following allegations he siphoned off millions of aid dollars.

Gautam Goswami, former chief administrator of state capital Patna, gave himself up to a magistrate and was remanded in custody for seven days, officials said.

He surrendered a day after his bail plea was rejected by the Patna High Court in his absence.

The former officer of the prestigious Indian Administrative Services is accused of siphoning off 170 million rupees (four million dollars) meant to rehabilitate victims

and provide relief during floods which claimed more than 800 lives in Bihar last year.

Millions were left homeless by



PHOTO: AFP

Former district magistrate Gautam Goswami (r), is escorted outside a court after surrendering in Patna yesterday.

the floods in the state.

The Bihar administration came under fire from victims and groups fighting on their behalf about its distribution of flood relief. Five people were killed when police opened fire on protesters.

After the allegations became public, Goswami defended himself at a press conference and described his conduct as "blameless."

Last October Time magazine cited Goswami for his "brilliant work" over the years, particularly in coordinating flood relief and rescue operations.

"Goswami's reputation for upholding the law improves the image of a civil service perceived by many Indians as corrupt or inefficient," the magazine said in its report which listed him alongside Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan.

BJP leader, activists arrested, then released

PTI, Chandigarh

Arun Jaitley, General Secretary of India's main opposition BJP, was on Thursday arrested and later released along with 273 other party workers when they tried to march to Punjab Raj Bhavan in protest against the price hike of petrol, diesel and other commodities.

A Chandigarh Police official said 274 persons, including Jaitley, Chandigarh BJP chief Yash Pal Mahajan and others were arrested, under various sections of the IPC, near the Sector 7-8 roundabout here when they were trying to march to Raj Bhavan as part of the party's week-long nationwide protest.

He said that all the arrested were discharged on the orders of the sub-divisional magistrate (east).

Jaitley also held a news conference inside the police station.

Tight security for 7th trans-Kashmir bus run

AFP, Srinagar

Security was tight Thursday for more than 40 passengers who left on the seventh run of the trans-border bus service connecting the Indian and Pakistani zones of divided Kashmir, police said.

The service, launched April 7 after a gap of almost 60 years, is bitterly opposed by some hardline rebel groups who have threatened to turn the vehicles into "coffins".

Two buses carrying 42 passengers left the Indian Kashmir summer capital Srinagar for the Line of Control, the de facto border dividing arch-rivals India and Pakistan in the disputed region, at around 8.00 am, a police spokesman said.

On board were 18 Indian Kashmiris visiting the Pakistani zone of the Himalayan region and 24 who were returning home after travelling two weeks ago to the Indian side on the fortnightly bus.

The two buses take the passengers only up to the Kaman Post on the LoC, where passengers from both sides cross a bridge by foot and board buses from the other side.

"We have sanitised the entire strip of road between Srinagar and Kaman Post," the police spokesman said.

Security convoys have been attacked along the 118-kilometer road in the past.

"We have taken the threat very seriously and before allowing the buses to ply on the road we check for boobytraps and landmines," the spokesman said, adding that sniffer dogs had also been pressed into service.

The reinstatement of the bus service is the most visible sign of progress in the slow-moving 18-month-old peace process between India and Pakistan aimed at ending their bitter dispute over Muslim-majority Kashmir, spark of two of their three wars since independence from Britain in 1947.

Moderate separatists used the service on June 2 to cross into the Pakistani portion of Kashmir and later to Pakistan. They returned June 16 after holding talks with politicians and officials on the other side.

'Myanmar's generals deaf to the world'

AFP, Yangon

By blocking their ears to repeated calls for the release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and that they give up the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2006, Myanmar's generals have shown they will listen to no one, analysts say.

The clamor on the Nobel laureate's 60th birthday this month to demand an end to her house arrest made little impact in Yangon, which has ignored calls by heads of state, ministers, other Nobel prize winners and human rights activists across the world that she be released.

Analysts say it is likely the regime has already decided she will not be freed before next year.

The generals would first want to re-convene the National Convention drafting a new constitution and have it approved in a referendum, the result of which is a foregone conclusion.

Only then would they feel comfortable to free the popular opposition leader.

Another thorny issue illustrates that the generals listen to no one: the junta's frustrating delay in finalizing whether it will assume the rotat-

ing chairmanship of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The United States and the European Union have threatened to boycott their annual security meetings and other forums with ASEAN if Myanmar heads the regional bloc in 2006, after Malaysia in an alphabetical rotation.

ASEAN itself is divided over the issue. Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos support Myanmar, while countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand have made it understood to Yangon they would prefer it relinquished the role.

Within ASEAN, "There is a sense of exasperation," a Yangon-based analyst said.

But Myanmar does not want to let go and has already begun preparations, extending the city's airport, resuming downtown construction and beautifying several parks.

"They are under serious pressure. They desperately want it, it is important for their credibility," he told AFP.

The decision, he said, rests solely with Senior General Than Shwe, the country's 72-year-old supreme leader.

Rain fury continues in Gujarat

PTI, Ahmedabad

Rains continued to lash Indian state of Gujarat on Thursday, even as high alert was sounded in Vadodara, Surat, Navsari, Dangs and south Gujarat after all major dams and lakes overflowed, prompting large-scale evacuations by authorities.

The Army and Air Force services have been requisitioned while the death toll due to rains has crossed 30 after one person was killed in a wall collapse in Anand district on Wednesday night, sources said.

Chief Minister Narendra Modi who was expected to carry an aerial survey of the worst affected areas has not been able to do so owing to bad weather, official sources said.

The state government has already evacuated more than 30,000 people across the state after rainwater flooded their habitats.

"Heavy rains have been reported from Anand, Kheda and Vadodara districts and the army has been requisitioned. Several people who were stranded in Adala in Ahmedabad and Surendranagar district overnight have been rescued this morning even though the rain water in these areas has not

subsided," state relief commis-

sioner Rajesh Kishore said. Reports from Vadodara, one of the worst rain-affected districts, said 10,000 people from low-lying areas of the city have been shifted to safer places following heavy rains in the catchments area of Vishwamitri and Wante rivers and more could be shifted if the water levels continue to rise.

The Pratapura Sarovar reservoir and the Ajwa lake are overflowing and people living in the vicinity have been alerted to shift to safer places.

The situation in Amreli district also turned grim with heavy rains being reported overnight in Khambha, Sabarkunda and Rajula talukas while the highest rainfall was recorded from Dangs district at 359 mm.

Officials also managed to rescue five passengers, who were stuck overnight in a state transport bus in Amreli district after rain water blocked roads completely.

Constant downpour has also affected road traffic in more than 500 routes including two national highways and efforts were on to clear the roads for smooth traffic flow.

Tigers kill three Sri Lankan troops

AFP, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels killed three soldiers from a military intelligence unit in a gunbattle in eastern Sri Lanka on Thursday, the defence ministry said.

The rebels attacked the three men who were travelling in a three-wheel scooter in the district of Batticaloa, a ministry spokesman said.

"One of our soldiers managed to fire about 10 rounds before he was killed by a burst of automatic fire from the terrorists," the spokesman said, adding that officials believed the attack to be the work of the Tigers.

There was no immediate word from the rebels. The pro-rebel tamilnet.com website reported the incident without comment.

The defence ministry spokesman said they believed the three troopers had been followed by two

men on a motorcycle who first opened fire on the scooter driver.

"We have reason to believe that the pillion rider may have been injured when our soldier fired back," the spokesman said, adding that a cordon-and-search operation was under way in the area.

A Norwegian-brokered truce has been in force since February 2002 in the island's 30-year ethnic conflict, in which more than 60,000 people were killed.

Tension has been rising in eastern Sri Lanka since a split in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in March last year. The government has accused the LTTE of killing hundreds of rivals and intelligence operatives despite the truce.

The guerrillas for their part have accused the government of supporting their rivals.



PHOTO: AFP

British charity worker wanted for alleged sex offence Duncan Grant (C) is escorted by Indian policemen after landing at Mumbai International Airport yesterday. Grant, wanted in India since November 2001 when he was accused by Mumbai street children of sexually abusing them at the Anchorage homeless shelters that he founded in the city, flew back to India to face the accusation.