

Major shake up in Maldives cabinet

AFP, Colombo

Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom yesterday announced a major cabinet shakeup including the promotion of his spokesman as the Indian Ocean atoll nation's new foreign minister.

Ahmed Shaheed, who replaces long-standing foreign minister Fathulla Jameel, told AFP the cabinet had been reshuffled in order to help the country recover from the December 26 tsunami disaster.

"The president has brought in several new faces to cabinet because of the new challenge of rebuilding the country after the tsunami disaster," said 41-year-old Shaheed, a career diplomat.

His new job would entail seeking support from the international community to help the Maldives recover from the disaster, he added in a telephone interview.

Pakistanis in grim search for missing relatives

AFP, Ghotki

Relatives desperately sought news of their loved ones yesterday as medical workers struggled to identify mangled corpses a day after around 150 people died in Pakistan's worst train crash in 15 years.

Stations across the country have been thronged with people frantically searching victim lists posted by the authorities after the three-train pile-up early Wednesday near the southern town of Ghotki.

Thousands of others travelling in buses, trains and trucks flocked to hospitals near the crash site, where for some, severed body parts held the answer they had been dreading.

"I can recognise his feet and hands," said sobbing Allah Ditta, who came to Ghotki hospital from Bhawalpur, a town in central Punjab province, to search for his missing brother.

A senior rail official told AFP Wednesday that 150 people had died, while doctors at the hospital said 164 people were killed. A Pakistan railways press release would only confirm 138 deaths.

Officials said they were trying to identify nearly 100 unclaimed bodies, which lay shrouded by white sheets in the courtyard of the small government hospital nearly 36 hours after the collision.

Ice-blocks and fans were used to cool the bodies because of the lack

of a nearby mortuary.

"We have so far handed 37 bodies to their relatives but 96 bodies are still lying at the hospital as their identification has not yet been established," railway police officer Shafi Mohammad Mughal told AFP.

"We are trying our best to find the family members so they can be laid to rest," he said. Muslim funerals are supposed to be held as soon as possible after the person's death and usually take place within one day.

"Most of the unclaimed bodies do not have faces and heads and we have gathered hands, feet and torsos," said Amanullah, a volunteer from the private Edhi Welfare Trust, Pakistan's largest charity.

The accident happened when one of the trains, the Quetta Express, stopped for repairs at Sarhad station, seven kilometres (four miles) from Ghotki, and the Karachi Express coming from Lahore smashed into it in the early hours.

A number of carriages were catapulted onto a parallel track and a third train, the Tez Gam Express heading for Islamabad's twin city Rawalpindi, then careered into them.

Rail chiefs Wednesday blamed the driver of the Karachi Express, who died in the crash, saying he misread a green signal meant for the stationary train.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani railway workers clear debris from the track at the crash scene in Ghotki, some 430km north-east of Karachi yesterday. Relatives desperately sought news of their missing loved ones a day after nearly 150 people died in Pakistan's deadliest train disaster for one and a half decades, when three trains collided at a station in the southern town of Ghotki.

Floods force thousands to flee homes in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Thousands of people have been displaced from their homes due to floods and landslides triggered by heavy monsoon rains across several parts of northeast India, officials said yesterday.

Swollen waters of the Brahmaputra -- one of Asia's largest rivers -- have displaced 8,000 people and cut off arterial roads to many parts of Assam, the largest of seven northeastern states, said Assam state official T. Das.

"The displaced people are now taking shelter in raised platforms or in government buildings," Das said.

The Brahmaputra is also threatening to overflow its banks at Majuli, the world's largest river island, 350km from the state capital Guwahati.

"There has been heavy erosion in many places in Majuli with at least five breaches of embankments already reported," a police official said.

The 2,906 kilometre (1,816 mile) Brahmaputra traverses China's Tibet region, India and Bangladesh before flowing into the sea at the Bay of Bengal.

Every year, monsoon rains trigger flooding and landslides, particularly in the northeastern region.

Last year, at least 200 people died and more than 12 million were displaced in Assam during the floods.

Several parts of Assam's adjoining state of Arunachal Pradesh have also been affected by floods after rains this week raised the level of the Lohit river, leading to roads, homes and farms being submerged.

"The districts of Lohit and Anjaw are cut off from the rest of the state as the main roads are topped over by floodwaters," said C. Tempa, an official of Arunachal Pradesh state.

He said nearly 2,000 people in the state have abandoned their homes due to flooding.

Most of India is in the grip of

monsoon rains which sweep the country from June to September. Some 150 people have died so far, mostly in western Gujarat state, according to official figures.

Meanwhile, the surging waters of the Ganges river have flooded several villages in the eastern state of Bihar, central Madhya Pradesh state and the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, an official said.

"Road communications in many parts of Bihar have been disrupted due to the rising water levels of the Baghmati river," said S.K. Mishra, the district magistrate of Bihar's flood-hit Muzaffarpur district.

However, officials said they were still able to deliver relief materials to the affected areas, as some of the roads are still motorable.

Nearly 4,000 people living close to the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh, where the water was flowing past the danger mark, have been evacuated by security forces, an official said.

Troops closing in on Kashmiri militants

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops were closing in on Islamic militants yesterday who have been shooting at them from positions high in the rugged Himalayas of northern Indian Kashmir, the army said, as seven people died in fresh violence.

The militants have engaged the soldiers in sporadic firefights since they were detected late Tuesday at the glacial heights of northern Gurez sector. The army says they infiltrated from the Pakistani zone of divided Kashmir.

"Intermittent exchanges continued throughout Wednesday," Indian army spokesman Vijay Batra told AFP.

He said the firing stopped after dark, allowing the security forces to advance, although heavy rain had hampered their progress.

"As the firing has stopped, troops are now inching forward towards the militant positions," Batra said, adding the rebels had split into groups and were firing on troops with AK-47 assault rifles.

"We are trying to outflank them and to gain height so we can dominate them," he said.

Batra declined to give casualty figures or say how many rebels there were. The military has said they made up the largest infiltration into Indian Kashmir since India and Pakistan began a slow-moving peace process to solve their decades-old dispute over Kashmir 19 months ago.

Indian media reports, quoting army sources, have said at least 35 militants had crossed the Line of Control (LoC) -- the ceasefire line dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan -- in groups from Monday.

In a separate clash along the LoC, Indian troops Thursday shot dead two rebel infiltrators in the adjoining northern Kupwara district, Batra said, adding a large cache of arms and explosives had been recovered.

In further violence, four rebels and a soldier were killed in three separate clashes in the districts of Anantnag in the south and Kupwara in the north, the spokesman said.

Chandrika appeals for calm

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president appealed for calm yesterday in the restive northeast where bomb attacks have killed four and wounded more than a dozen since the week-end, as police reinforcements were rushed to the area.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga said she had ordered "specific measures" to bring the situation in the coastal district of Trincomalee under control after an upsurge of violence following the killing of four Tiger rebels on

Sunday.

"Several specific measures and systems have been put in place to arrest and remedy the situation and the respective security forces commanders have been instructed to directly oversee the implementation," a statement from her office said without elaborating.

Minutes after her statement was released, another grenade attack was reported from Trincomalee in which two civilians were wounded.

Police said the grenade was aimed at a military vehicle but it

missed the target and exploded in the middle of the road, wounding two civilian bystanders.

Police said reinforcements together with extra vehicles were being rushed to the troubled region to beef up security amid fears for the Norwegian-brokered truce between government troops and Tamil rebels.

"Other police divisions have been asked to send men and vehicles to strengthen police stations in the Trincomalee area," a local police officer said when contacted by telephone.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (R) is followed by Home Minister Shivraj Patil (L) as they leave the prime minister's residence after a cabinet meeting in New Delhi yesterday. The Indian Cabinet approved a 20 million Indian rupee (USD 461,395) assistance for Bhutan, a Himalayan kingdom.