

Over 1,000 killed in S Asia earthquake

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad

A strong earthquake measuring at least 7.6 on the Richter Scale caused massive devastation yesterday across a swathe of Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, leaving thousands of people feared dead.

Pakistani and Indian officials confirmed more than 1,000 deaths. However, there were no casualties or damage in Bangladesh, also jolted by the tremor.

The quake struck close to the dividing line between the Indian and Pakistani controlled zones of the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, triggering deadly landslides that wiped out whole villages.

The earthquake sent people fleeing their homes in areas over 1,000 kilometres apart, from the western Pakistani desert city of Quetta to Kunduz in the mountains of northern Afghanistan.

"This is the strongest quake in the last 100 years in this region," the chief of Pakistan's meteorological department, Qamar Uzzman, told AFP.

Pakistani officials described scenes of "massive devastation" and warned of heavy loss of life, especially

in the mountains of Kashmir where communications were cut off.

Officials confirmed over 1,000 deaths, but Pakistani military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP the toll would rise dramatically. "The death toll could be in the thousands. The devastation is massive," he said.

600 KILLED IN PAKISTAN
In Pakistan's North West Frontier Province alone, more than 550 people were killed, said Riffat Pasha, the provincial head of police.

"The death toll is between 550 and 600 in North West Frontier Province and it is likely to rise," he said.

At least 250 people were confirmed dead in Muzaffarabad, the main town of 125,000 people in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. The military said over 50 percent of the buildings in the town had been destroyed or damaged.

General Sultan said several villages in Kashmir had been totally "wiped out" and that troops and helicopters had been scrambled to reach the stricken areas.

"Village after village has been wiped out," an army relief official in Muzaffarabad said. "The Neelum

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Pakistani rescue workers gather in front of a collapsed building in Islamabad yesterday, following an earthquake measuring at least 7.6 on the Richter scale. The map, inset, shows the quake-hit region of the sub-continent.

Purge alliance patrons of militants or face agitation

14-party gives govt a Nov 14 ultimatum

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League (AL) led 14-party opposition combine yesterday issued an ultimatum to the government to act against the 'patrons of the militants in the ruling alliance' by November 14, or it will go for tougher agitation programmes.

The opposition grouping at a press conference in the city also demanded the arrest and trial of former home minister and now Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) leader Maulana

Muhiuddin for sheltering militant kingpin Mufti Abdul Hannan.

The opposition parties alleged that Industries Minister and Jamaat Ameer Motiur Rahman Nizami, State Ministers Alamgir Kabir, Goutam Chakraborti, Deputy Minister Ruhul Quddus Talukdar Dulu, and Rajshahi City Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu have long been involved in patronising the Islamist militant groups and people like Bangla Bhai, Shaikh Abdul Rahman and Mufti Hannan.

"If the government fails to take

action against Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and other ministers, lawmakers, and the mayor who side with the religious extremists, we the opposition alliance will declare tougher agitation programmes from a grand rally on November 15," AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil told the press conference arranged at the Jatiya Press Club.

Reading out a written statement, he also demanded action against the banks, insurance companies, and

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Bangladesh jolted, no casualties

STAR REPORT

Moderate tremors were felt in at least 17 districts in Bangladesh yesterday morning as a major earthquake hit the entire subcontinent, leaving thousands of people dead.

However, there was no report of any damage or casualties in Bangladesh.

The tremor measuring 5.4 on the Richter Scale rocked the port city of Chittagong and adjoining areas at 9:58am and lasted for 62 seconds, sources said.

Its epicentre was 608 kilometres away from the country's lone seismic

observatory centre at Ambagan in Chittagong, officials at the centre added.

Our Barisal correspondent reports: A mild tremor jolted different areas of the southern region including Barisal and Patuakhali districts yesterday morning.

The tremor occurred between 9:57am and 10:05am and lasted for 10 to 20 seconds.

Locals got panicked seeing unusual waves in the rivers and other water bodies, many of which overflowed their banks during the earthquake.

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Durga Puja starts today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Blowing conches, ringing bells and cymbals, and booming drums (dhak) amid high-pitched ululation of thousands of Hindus herald today the five-day Durga Puja across the country.

According to tradition, the goddess descends on earth today--the Mahashasti--accompanied by her children Ganesh, Kartik, Lakshmi and Saraswati at the invocation and supplication of the devotees and stays for the next four days. The days are Mahasaptami on Monday, Mahastami on Tuesday, Mahanabami on Wednesday and Bijoya Dashami on Thursday.

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Major quakes in South Asia

REUTERS, Undated

Large parts of Pakistan, India and Afghanistan are seismically active because underneath them, the Indian plate is pushing north into the Eurasian plate.

The region's most severe earthquake in memory was on May 31, 1935, when a quake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale destroyed Quetta, in what is now western Pakistan, killing 30,000 to 60,000 people, according to US Geological Survey statistics.

Following are some of the most serious earthquakes in the region in recent decades:

December 28, 1974: Pakistan - Earthquake of 6.2 kills 5,300 people in nine towns in northern mountains.

August 20, 1988: Nepal-India border - Earthquake measuring 6.6 kills 1,450 people.

October 19, 1991: India - About 2,000 were killed in a 7.0 earthquake in northern India.

February 4, 1998: Afghanistan - Some 2,300 were killed in an earthquake in the Rustaq district of Takhar province. The quake measured 6.1 on the Richter scale.

May 30, 1998: Afghanistan - A powerful earthquake measuring 6.9 killed up to 4,000 people and destroyed 50 villages in Takhar

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Oct 3 blasts at courts planned by Abdur Rahman's brother Suspect investigators

STAR REPORT

The October 3 blasts at courthouses in three districts were carried out on the instructions of Ataur Rahman alias Sunny, brother of Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) chief Abdur Rahman, investigators suspect.

Freshly shaven, Ataur had visited Chittagong a day or two before October 3 and directed the militants to explode bombs at Chittagong courts, said an investigator seeking anonymity.

Two militants caught red-handed during the explosions at Chittagong courts gave away the information while being quizzed at the Joint Interrogation Cell (JIC) in Dhaka yesterday.

The two--Mohammad Laitu alias Anam, 20, and Shahadat Hossain, 25--were sent to the JIC on Friday.

"We have issued instructions and photographs containing the likely appearance of a clean-shaven Ataur to the law enforcers across the country so that they can nab the militant leader," said the investigator.

In another development, police arrested four more JMB members, including a suspected trainer of the militants in Khetal and Kalai upazilas of Joypurhat on Friday night.

Meanwhile, the law enforcers are preparing to press charges against the accused in the blast cases filed with different police stations across the country.

Charge sheets against seven people accused in 12 blast cases in Barisal city have already been prepared and are likely to be submitted by this week, while investigation officer (IO) of the Sathira blast case is preparing to submit a charge sheet against 11 people.

Police sources said as the cases were filed under the Explosive Substances Act, the charge sheets must be submitted within a 60-day timeframe, which expires on October 17.

DHAKA
Detectives on Friday night arrested

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No CGS in army for last 3 months

SHAKHAWAT LITON

The post of chief of general staff (CGS), the second highest official after the chief of staff in the army, has remained vacant for over three months and a half while the government is still looking for a "competent" person among several senior officers for appointment to the post.

The CGS is the head of the general staff branch that includes the directorates of staff duties, military operations, military intelligence, military training, weapons, equipment and statistics, budget, information technology, armoured, artillery, signal, infantry and education under the army.

Absence of the CGS is causing difficulties in coordination activities of the directorates at the army headquarters and putting extra burden on the chief of staff as he has to look into the affairs of the general staff branch now, sources said.

The post of CGS fell vacant on June 14 this year after the then CGS, Major General Moeen U Ahmed, was appointed as the chief of army staff with effect from June 15.

In last five years, the post of CGS remained vacant for one month at the longest while on other occasions, the post was filled in a week of its falling vacant, sources said.

"The vital post of CGS should not remain vacant for long," said former army chief and present Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence Ministry Maj Gen Mahabur Rahman.

Floods grip more dists

10 lakh marooned in Naogaon; Gobindaganj-Dinajpur road link snapped

STAR REPORT

Flood situations in the northern districts including Gaibandha, Rangpur, Naogaon, and Kurigram have further worsened.

About one lakh people have been rendered homeless due to collapse of earthen houses in Badarganj and Mithapukur upazilas in Rangpur district.

About 10 lakh people of Naogaon district have become marooned.

The flood in Gobindaganj and Palashbari upazilas in Gaibandha district worsened as the Karotoa river fed by an onrush of water from upstream continues to flow 79cm above danger mark while water levels of Teesta, Ghagot and Brahmaputra rivers remained static yesterday, our Gaibandha correspondent reports.

A 3-year-old child drowned in floodwater in Palashbari upazila.

Highway communication

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PHOTO: STAR

A farmer family in Gaibandha takes their belongings to safety on a raft of banana plants as flooding continues to deteriorate in the district.

2 hundi traders held with Tk 58 lakh

UNB, Savar

Two alleged hundi traders carrying Tk 58 lakh in a land cruiser from Jessore were arrested here yesterday.

The arrestees claimed that they were innocent and the money was legal.

Earlier, Savar police had the information that two persons were carrying a huge amount of money and diamonds from Nawapara in Jessore to Dhaka in a private car.

They took position at Jamgara on the EPZ-Abdullahpur road and intercepted the vehicle at Ashuaia check post. They detained the two--Liakot Ali of West Dasra in Manikganj, and driver Ali Hossain of Geneva Camp at Mohammadpur in the capital. Police brought them to the police station.

After searching luggage in the vehicle, police recovered Tk 58 lakh, but failed to recover the diamonds.

The law enforcers suspected that the arrestees could be the associates of hundi trader Om Prakash of Jessore.

Liakot and Hossain said they work with Uttara Traders in the capital.

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