

European countries offer aid to quake-hit S Asia

AFP, Brussels

European countries responded swiftly to yesterday's massive earthquake which hit Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, offering aid and funds as well as condolences. As casualty figures rose from the devastating quake the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said up to three million euros (3.6 million dollars) could be approved within a day if requested by agencies working on the ground. "We are all hoping that the news does not get steadily worse as the day progresses but we are fearful that the casualty figures may mount and that international support may be needed," said EU aid commissioner Louis Michel. A spokesman said the commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) was in touch with two organizations -- Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF)

Netherlands and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) -- about the crisis. "It depends on what these organizations tell us they need," said the spokesman, Amadeu Altafaj, stressing that the two organizations were chosen because they are already on the ground. "They can save more lives and faster. This is the priority of course," he told AFP. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw for his part said, "We are offering help to the Pakistani government and are ready to respond to all requests." Straw said he had been "very distressed" to hear of the quake, particularly as "so many British people of Pakistani heritage come from the area affected or have relatives who live there." Overseas Development Minister Hillary Benn, calling the earthquake, "a major disaster," said British search and rescue teams were ready to fly out to the

affected areas as soon as help is requested. In Berlin Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said Germany had immediately released 50,000 euros to be made available to Pakistani authorities through Berlin's embassy in Islamabad. The German Red Cross would be working with the Pakistani Red Crescent to bring relief to affected areas, and Berlin was in contact with the United Nations with regard to further humanitarian action, he said. Turkey, a frequent victim of earthquakes which have killed many thousands of people, also offered aid to fellow Muslim country Pakistan, Anadolu news agency reported, quoting Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul. "We are ready to provide every sort of help," Gul said, adding that Ankara had a "duty" to do so. Turkish civil defence and Red Crescent teams, experienced in working in earthquake zones, had been

placed on the alert. Gul also sent condolences to India, Anatolia said. Turkey's neighbour Greece, which also suffers almost daily tremors, said it was ready to send a team of specialists to the region. Expressing sympathy and solidarity, the foreign ministry said "Greece intends to contribute to the efforts of search and rescue." Elsewhere, French President Jacques Chirac sent a message of support to his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf, his office said. "France is standing by Pakistan in this painful trial," Chirac added, without specifying any offer of assistance. Musharraf received a similar message from Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin said.

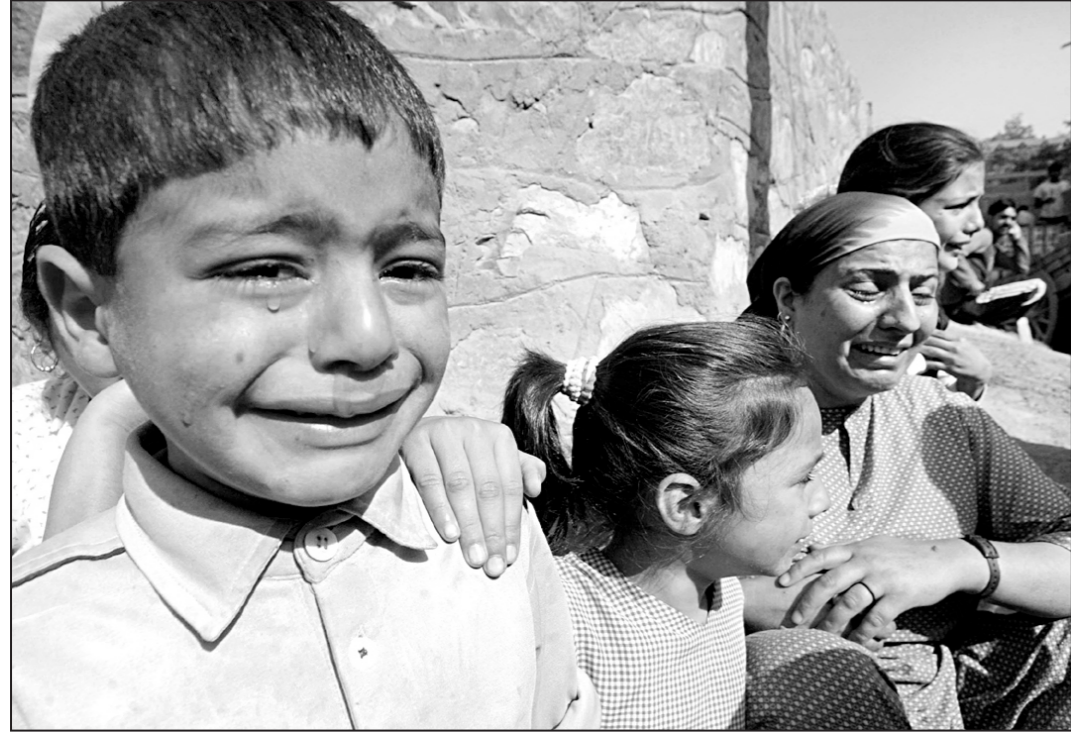


Pakistani policemen and rescuers remove debris from a collapsed building hit by a massive earthquake in Islamabad yesterday. The massive earthquake is feared to have killed thousands of people in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan on Saturday.

Eerie sound of birds brought killer quake

AFP, Islamabad

The piercing screeches of birds fleeing their perches in the trees of Islamabad heralded the arrival of yesterday's killer earthquake. As thousands of trees in the green city swayed and buckled, a menacing rumbling sound came up from the ground while the windows of houses and buildings in the Pakistani capital rattled and shook. "The sound of the birds screaming really added to the feeling of fear. You could see crows circling above," said an AFP correspondent. "I never felt such a powerful earthquake in my life. The minarets of the mosques were shaking," added security guard Mohammad Akram. "People came out from their homes and buildings when the quake hit. Some of them started praying to God," Akram said. In the first minutes after the earthquake measuring at least 7.6 on the Richter Scale struck early Saturday, thousands of people fled their houses and sought the relative safety of Islamabad's broad tree-lined avenues.



An Indian Kashmiri family reacts following a powerful earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale that hits the area in Sopore some 60km north of Srinagar yesterday. The powerful earthquake may have killed thousands of people in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Screams follow quake

Rattled Kashmir counts the cost

AFP, Srinagar

Screams and wails of mourning filled the air as panicked residents ran for their lives when a massive earthquake hit Indian Kashmir yesterday, killing or wounding hundreds. In the summer capital Srinagar, people fled their homes, shops and offices fearing they would be buried under heaps of rubble. Men spontaneously started reading out verses from the Koran, the Muslim holy book, as the ground shook for more than a minute, while women beat their chests in the streets in a traditional display of bereavement. "This is the strongest earthquake I have ever witnessed in my life," said 84-year-old Srinagar resident Aisha Begum. At least 157 civilians and 21 soldiers perished across the northern state, government chief secretary Vijay Bakya told AFP, including eight-

month-old Muslim boy Musa Zargar who died when a wall of his house collapsed on him in Srinagar, residents said. The baby's mother was among 500 people authorities reported hospitalised for injuries and shock after the quake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale. Bakya warned that the toll could climb much higher as reports arrived from isolated areas. A fresh tremor rattled residents and buildings for several seconds at about 4:15 pm, sparking renewed panic. "There were fresh screams and people shouted 'Help oh Allah,' housewife Arshi Amin told AFP, adding that everyone in the quarter rushed outside, some shouting Islamic verses. Along the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan, frontier

bunkers collapsed on troops, some forward posts caved in and others were hit by falling trees and landslides. "There can be more casualties," army spokesman Major P. Sehgal told AFP. Thousands of army soldiers man the LoC to prevent Muslim rebels from entering Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani zone of the divided state. The military spokesman said more than 100 people were being treated at an army hospital in northern Urit town, 100 kilometers (60 miles) north of Srinagar, where 200 houses were damaged and people were sifting through the rubble for the missing. Local resident Abdul Aziz said telephone and power lines were down. "The tremors have also caused landslides blocking the main highway between Srinagar and Uri," he said, adding that the slides made it hard to bring the injured to hospitals in Srinagar.

Shaken from sleep, residents faced quake horror

AFP, Islamabad

As the building rocked, terrified residents fled to their balconies in a futile bid to escape before the 10-storey apartment block in the heart of Islamabad came crashing down. "We all rushed out of our houses. People were in their pyjamas and many women there were without slippers and without their dopatta (scarf)," said Sajida Burki, who lives in a nearby tower that was untouched. "We saw people rushing to a balcony on the other building but while it was still rocking, it crashed down and the occupants came down with the mass of the concrete." At 8:50am (0350 GMT) on Saturday, many people living in the upscale Margalla Towers apartment block in Islamabad were enjoying the chance to sleep in after a hectic

working week. Minutes later, a monster earthquake had transformed the plush building to a heap of rubble and twisted metal. Afterwards, dust-covered survivors could be seen pinned under huge concrete slabs. Cries for help floated from the wreckage, as people used their bare hands to claw through the debris. "There were screams of women and children, many are still trapped inside and we can hear cries. It's a tragic scene," Burki said. "I have just seen another body being pulled out. The place is devastated," said an AFP photographer at the scene. Many foreigners including Japanese, Italians and Arabs rented apartments there because they were considered relatively safe and secure.

Foreign troops to stay in Iraq another two years

AFP, Baghdad

Foreign troops in Iraq might be replaced within two years, depending on how fast the country's own troops can provide security, as signs emerged that the insurgency is suffering internal woes, US and Iraqi officials said. The forecast came as Iraqis prepared to vote next week in a constitutional referendum whose outcome will help determine the success or failure of the rebel movement. President Jalal Talabani, on a visit to London, said Iraq's army was making progress towards replacing US-led troops in securing his violence-torn country. "Within two years I think our troops will be ready to replace the coalition forces in Iraq," he told Britain's Sky News television during on Friday. "But the withdrawal of these forces must depend on a resolution from the (UN) Security Council and negotiations between the Iraqi government and the coalition forces," he added.

On Thursday, he had warned that a rushed pull-out would be a catastrophe. In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said an intercepted letter from al-Qaeda's number two to its top militant in Iraq revealed concern over the impact on Arab opinion of beheadings and videotaped executions. Ayman Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's second in command, also complained about communications, unity of command and funding problems to the extent that he asked Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, for money, the spokesman said. Existence of the 6,000-word letter, written in July, was disclosed to certain US news organisations on Thursday after President George W. Bush gave a speech aimed at shoring up eroding US support for the war against al-Qaeda. Early Saturday, an audiotape attributed to Zarqawi claimed that Islam permits the killing of "infidel"

civilians. "In Islam, making the difference is not based on civilians and military, but on the basis of Muslims and infidels," said the voice on the tape, broadcast on the Internet. "The Muslim's blood cannot be spilled whatever his work or place, while spilling the blood of the infidel, whatever his work or place, is authorized if he is not trustworthy," said the tape, whose veracity could not be determined. In Washington, the US State Department said Friday that deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein should face trial as scheduled on October 19. A senior British official had said Wednesday that the trial might be postponed because of logistical considerations such as the installation of bullet-proof screens or establishment of a witness protection programme.

India boosts security along Nepal border

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has doubled the number of troops on its porous border with Nepal to stop the deadly Maoist insurgency in the Himalayan kingdom from spilling over, India's junior home minister said on Friday. Sri Prakash Jaiswal's comments came after an announcement by the powerful Maoists fighting the constitutional monarchy in Nepal that they would work with radical leftists on the Indian side in their campaign to promote communism in the region. "We are always worried about any violent groups becoming stronger in any of our neighbouring countries," Jaiswal told Reuters. "On the India-Nepal border, we have increased the number of security posts and doubled the strength of the force but we want Nepal to solve its problem," he added. The number of troops guarding the border is now expected to rise to

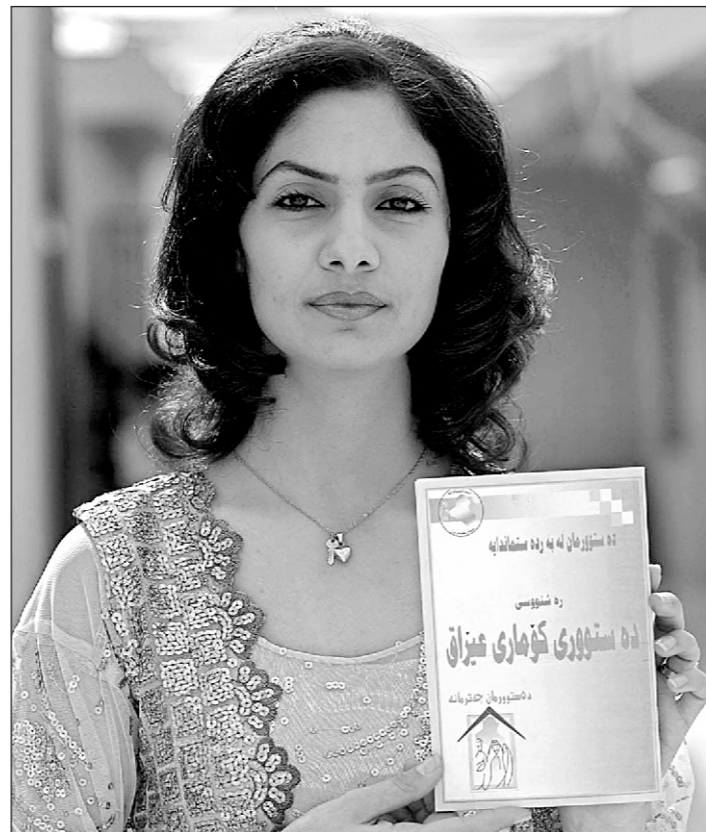
around 45,000. India and Nepal share a 1,750-km border, with locals needing no visa to cross. More than 12,500 people have died since the Maoists launched their campaign in 1996 to install communist rule in Nepal. They now control a vast swathe of the country-side. On the Indian side, left-wing extremism has spread to nine states stretching from Bihar on the border with Nepal to Andhra Pradesh in the south. The rebels say their campaign, which has killed more than 10,000 people, is aimed at securing land for the dispossessed. Rebels in the two countries have been helping each other out for some years, but the announcement to fight together has caused alarm. Jaiswal said troops would be given armour-plated vehicles to protect them from landmines.

Opposition calls for unity to end Lankan bloodshed

AFP, Kandy

Sri Lanka's opposition leader launched his presidential election bid from this historic city yesterday urging unity among the deeply divided Sinhalese ahead of a peace deal with Tamil rebels. Former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe called on the island's influential Buddhist clergy to help unite the majority Sinhalese community, who mainly follow Buddhism. "We cannot have a peaceful solution to the conflict unless the two main parties in the country unite and have a common position on the national question," Wickremesinghe, himself from the Sinhalese-Buddhist community, said. He urged the two main sects -- Malwatte and Asgiriya -- here in Kandy, 112 kilometres (72 miles) east of the capital Colombo, to bring about unity with his United National Party and the rival Freedom Alliance.

Both Wickremesinghe and his rival contender, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, also a Sinhalese Buddhist, worshipped Friday at Kandy's Temple of the Tooth, one of the holiest Buddhist shrines, shortly after filing their election nomination papers in Colombo. They met the top Buddhist leaders separately and sought blessings of the monks in two separate ceremonies. The monks blessed both and urged them to work together for peace. Wickremesinghe has vowed to revive peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels while Rajapakse has promised to overhaul the Norwegian-backed peace initiative if elected at the November 17 vote. Buddhist monk Narampanawe Ananda said a peaceful solution had to be acceptable to all to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed which has claimed over 60,000 lives. "Ending the conflict is the main challenge before the next president," Ananda told AFP.



An Iraqi Kurd shows a copy of the draft constitution she received in the Kurdish city of Arbil, north of Baghdad yesterday. Iraqi authorities began handing out millions of copies of a draft constitution in the run-up to next week's hotly contested referendum on the post-Saddam Hussein charter.

Washington Monument reopens after threat

AP, Washington

The Washington Monument was closed for about two hours Friday after a bomb threat was called in to local police. A search turned up nothing suspicious. US Park Police Sgt. Scott Fear said the call came in at 2:24 p.m. EDT and the monument was evacuated a short time later. Bomb-sniffing dogs were called in and two blocks between Constitution and Independence avenues were closed off. The monument reopened at about 4:15 p.m. after nothing was found, Fear said. A law enforcement official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because other agencies were handling the case, said the credibility of the threat was low but officials did not want to take any chances. The Washington Monument, which was built in the 1800s and dedicated on Feb. 21, 1885, rises 555 feet over the National Mall. It reopened to the public last spring after undergoing a seven-month, \$15 million security overhaul that included vehicle barriers and a new lighting system.