



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri survivors grasp for relief supplies at a makeshift relief camp in the midst of a devastated thickly populated residential area of Muzaffarabad, capital city of Pakistan administered Kashmir, yesterday.

Victims scuffle for aid

Rain hampers quake rescue efforts

AP, AFP, Muzaffarabad

Trucks of aid arrived in the ruined capital of Pakistan-ruled Kashmir yesterday, and victims scuffled for badly needed food and blankets three days after a devastating earthquake flattened whole communities.

The government's official death toll remained at slightly over 20,000 people, but a senior army official who is close to the rescue operations said Tuesday that "according to our assessment, the death toll is between 35,000 to 40,000 people."

Most of the dead were in the Himalayan region of Kashmir, said the official, who requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to disclose the estimate to journalists. Previously, the top elected official in Kashmir had estimated the toll at more than 25,000, while the province's communications minister, Tariq Mahmood, said it was more than 30,000.

US military helicopters, diverted from neighbouring Afghanistan, helped ferry wounded people from the wrecked city of Muzaffarabad, while international rescue teams joined searches during the waning days of hope for finding survivors.

About 10 trucks brought by Pakistani charities and volunteers rumbled into that city, where efforts by relief workers to distribute aid turned chaotic as residents scuffled for the handouts of cooking oil, sugar, rice, blankets and tents.

It was the first major influx of aid since the monster 7.6-magnitude quake struck Saturday morning, destroying most homes and all government buildings in this city, and leaving its 600,000 people without power or water. Most have spent three cold nights without shelter.

Two or three police looked on helplessly as more than 200 people

raided a stock of food arranged by relief workers at a soccer field near Muzaffarabad's centre one of six designated aid distribution points. One man made off with a big sack of sugar, another left on a motorized rickshaw with a big crate of drinking water.

"Relief activity has started on a massive level," said deputy city commissioner Masood-ur Rehman. He said two army brigades would start clearing roads and debris in the city on Tuesday.

In the northern town of Balakot, a French team rescued a number of children from a buried school on Monday. Eric Supara, an official at the French embassy in Islamabad, said five children were saved.

Meanwhile, torrential rain lashed quake-hit Muzaffarabad yesterday, bringing aid efforts in the devastated Kashmiri city to a temporary stand-

still, witnesses said.

Helicopters that have been making regular flights to bring aid and evacuate the injured from the Pakistani Kashmir capital were halted by the storm, an AFP correspondent said.

The storm rolled over the area in the early afternoon, turning the rubble-ridden streets into rivers of slush but -- for a while at least -- washing away the stench of death.

"It's brought everything to a halt," the correspondent said.

Muzaffarabad sits in the bottom of the mountainous Kashmir valley and can suffer from violently unpredictable weather.

Other areas in the quake zone were hit by thunder and hailstorms, witnesses and weather officials said.

"It is raining in the whole area from Mansehra to Abbotabad right now," a meteorological office spokesman said.



Angela Merkel
Germany's first female chancellor

1954	Born Hamburg, July 17, 1954. Family moves to former East Germany
1973-1978	University of Leipzig, studies physics, obtains doctorate
1990	Joins CDU, wins seat in German parliament
1991-1994	Minister for Women and Youth
1994-1998	Minister of the Environment
1998	2nd marriage, to academic Joachim Sauer
2000	Becomes CDU chairman
2005	Oct 10: becomes chancellor following Sept 18 elections

Angela Merkel triumphant, but at a price

BBC ONLINE, BERLIN

As she announced the deal that will make her chancellor, Angela Merkel looked relieved and happy, but there was little sense of triumph.

Her reaction was oddly subdued, considering that Merkel is breaking the mould of German politics.

Not only will she be the country's first woman chancellor, she will also be the first leader to have grown up in communist East Germany.

But Merkel had to be pushed by journalists to admit that she was pleased at the agreement with the Social Democrats.

"I'm in a good mood," she said, "but I know that there is a lot of work ahead."

Some observers put this down to Merkel's Protestant work ethic.

But it is more likely a reflection of the intensely difficult negotiations of the past three weeks and the prospect of more to come.

The two parties - which until recently were bitter rivals - don't trust each other.

"Germany needs reform," the CDU MP Michael Fuchs told me. "I hope the SPD understands that too."

Space tourist returns to earth

REUTERS, Moscow

A Russian Soyuz capsule touched down in Kazakhstan yesterday, bringing a Russian cosmonaut, a US astronaut and an American space tourist back to Earth, mission controls said.

The two-man crew returned home after half a year in orbit on the International Space Station. Millionaire scientist and entrepreneur Gregory Olsen spent just over a week with them in space, paying a reported \$20 million for the trip.

PAKISTAN, INDIA SAY Nukes safe after quake

AFP, Islamabad

Rivals Pakistan and India said their nuclear warheads and installations were safe after the weekend's devastating earthquake, which caused major casualties on both sides.

The South Asian neighbours conducted tit-for-tat atomic tests in 1998 and in 2002 came to the brink of war along their ceasefire line in the divided Himalayan territory of Kashmir, the area worst hit by Saturday's 7.6 magnitude quake.

"There is no danger to our nuclear installations and weapons from earthquakes," Pakistan military spokesman major general Shaukat Sultan told AFP. "They are fully safe."

Sultan said he was not immediately able to say up to what intensity the Pakistani nuclear facilities could withstand earthquakes and aftershocks.

Indian government officials declined to comment on the status of their atomic bombs but Indian defence experts said no warheads are deployed anywhere near the border

with Pakistan.

Separately, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited said they had "not received any reports of any damage to any of our facilities". India's 15 nuclear power plants also withstood a giant quake in Gujarat in January 2001, the corporation's website said.

Up to 40,000 people are thought to have died in Pakistan from the weekend's monster quake, many of them in Pakistani Kashmir, and a further 950 have been confirmed dead in India's sector of the region.

The quake also caused massive structural damage, wiping out whole villages and laying waste to some 75 percent of Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistani Kashmir.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at Islamabad's Quaid-i-Azam University, said the quake posed more danger to nuclear power plants than the nuclear weapons.

Pakistan's main uranium enrichment facility in Kahuta, near Islamabad, is located about 75km southeast of Kashmir.

Rebels kill 19 cops in Afghanistan

AP, AFP, Kabul

Suspected Taliban rebels ambushed a police convoy in southern Afghanistan and killed 19 officers, the deadliest attack ever on the fledgling police force, officials said yesterday.

The convoy of 150 police was attacked late Monday while driving on a dirt road along the side of a mountain in Helmand province, said Interior Ministry spokesman Yusuf Stanikzai.

Dozens of insurgents opened fire on the convoy, sparking a gunbattle that lasted until early Tuesday before the militants fled into the mountains, he said.

Among the 19 dead was Helmand's deputy police chief, Stanikzai said. Four police officers were wounded and four police vehicles were destroyed.

The number of fatalities is believed to be among the biggest suffered in a single attack by the fledgling Afghan police force, which started forming in late 2001.

Security forces rushed reinforcements into the area and have secured the region, the spokesman said.

India sends aid for Pak quake victims

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

An Indian transport plane was to fly with 25 tons of relief supplies, including tents, food and medicines, to earthquake-hit Pakistan where a massive tremor struck last Saturday flattening villages and killing thousands of people.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran said here on Monday evening that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has directed that a consignment of relief items "should be put together on a very urgent basis and delivered to Pakistan at the earliest."

This would be the first plane-load of relief supplies to Pakistan since the 1971 Indo-Pak conflict when an Indian Air Force jet would land in that country.

Saran said the Indian prime minister called Pakistan High Commissioner to India Aziz Ahmed Khan on Monday and "reiterated the offer to send relief for earthquake victims".

Khan later contacted the Pakistan government, which, after consultations, accepted the Indian aid offer.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri told an Indian television channel that there was no problem in accepting aid from India in such a

situation. "When it is a question of tragedy, it is not a question of one-upmanship".

Soon after Saturday's earthquake, Manmohan Singh had called Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and offered humanitarian assistance. Musharraf, in turn, had made a similar offer for the victims of the quake in India's Jammu and Kashmir state where more than 11,000 people have died.

Besides humanitarian value, Pakistan's acceptance of Indian relief aid carried immense political implications for the two nuclear-powered neighbours, which have taken several confidence-building measures in the last one year to improve bilateral relations.

Pakistan had earlier declined an offer of India to send helicopters to help distribute relief and ruled out joint rescue operations along the Line of Control dividing Kashmir.

Analysts here say Saturday's devastating earthquake offered an opportunity to overcome their past hostilities at a time of common adversity as they cope with a shared humanitarian crisis in Kashmir region.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) meets injured earthquake victims at a field hospital in Uri, some 110km from Srinagar yesterday. The earthquake death toll in Indian Kashmir rose above 1,100 people with more than 5,000 injured, a police emergency management officer told AFP.

Amputations, agony for child quake evacuees

AFP, Islamabad

On the rare occasions 12-year-old Amir Zahoor jolts awake, he starts screaming at his father to run away from the earthquake. Then there is silence as he falls back into unconsciousness.

"He has developed some fear, some psychological or mental problem," weeps Zahoor Ahmed, sitting on a bench beside his son's bed at Islamabad's main hospital, the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS).

The boy suffered serious head injuries and a fractured shoulder when his school in the devastated Pakistani Kashmir city of Muzaffarabad -- like thousands of others across the country -- collapsed in Saturday's quake.

The family's house also collapsed and Ahmed's wife lost both of her legs. "All he does is shout 'go, get out, there is an earthquake,'" added

Ahmed, 35, a power company worker. Yet, the boy was one of the lucky ones.

Only a select few hundred were aboard the first helicopters out of the disaster zone. They then got the medical aid that tens of thousands of others have little chance of ever receiving.

PIMS's paediatric wards are crowded with young quake victims ranging in age from 18 months to 12 years. They came from the hardest hit areas -- Muzaffarabad, Balakot, Bagh, Rawalakot.

"Some 190 children have so far been brought and admitted to four wards," Zaheer Abbasi, the hospital's head of paediatric surgery, told AFP.

He said they all bear the gruesome signature of the earthquake: crush injuries to the head, abdomen, chest and head, broken limbs, and worse.

"We had to amputate the limbs of five children, aged from six to 12. They had either hand or leg injuries and they were very serious," he said.