

'Earthquake prediction is still far off'

AFP, London

A prolonged attempt to help scientists predict when earthquakes will happen has ended in a sad failure, according to a study published on Thursday in Nature, the British science weekly.

The paper -- whose publication coincides with the aftermath of the quake that struck Pakistan and India, killing tens of thousands of people -- is based on a long-term project in California.

Scientists sowed a 40-kilometer (25-mile) part of the notorious San Andreas fault, located at the city of Parkfield, with scores of seismic sensors to monitor earth rumbles and movement in real time.

But an earthquake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale struck that region on September 28, 2004 without any warning. There was not the slightest hint of a buildup of strain or impending landslide.

Parkfield had long been fingered as a good testbed for earthquake physics as it had experienced seven big quakes since 1857, and these events were quite evenly spaced apart.

Because of that, the US Geological Survey (USGS) felt confident enough in 1985 to predict that a 6.0 quake would occur in Parkfield before 1993.

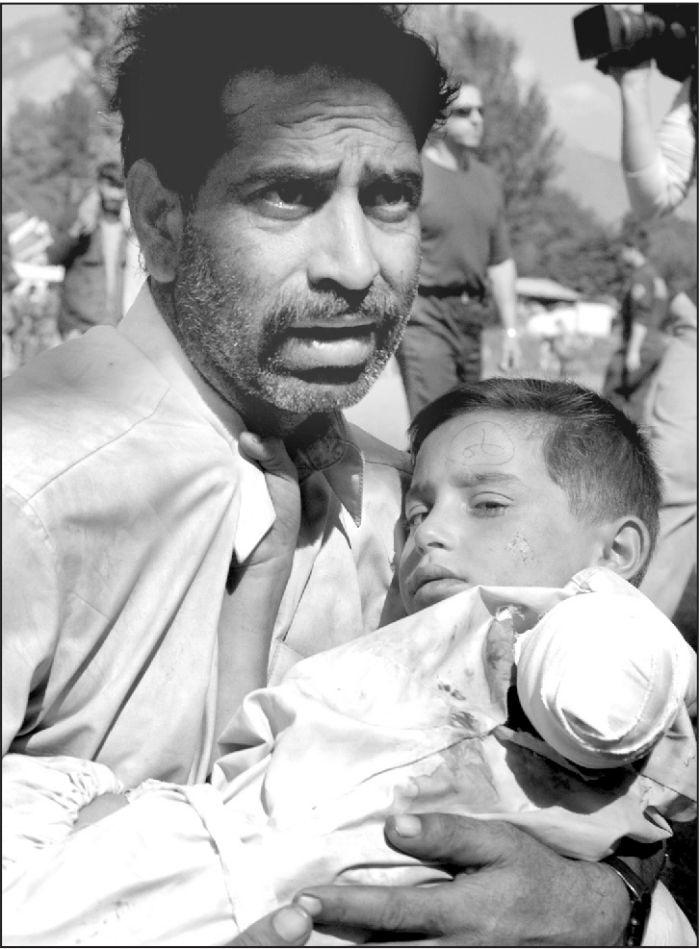


PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani Kashmiri holds his son with an amputated arm in Muzaffarabad as they arrived from the quake devastated region of Bagh yesterday.

Cry for more mercy flights

UN appeals for \$272m quake aid

AFP, AP, Muzaffarabad

Relief operations in earthquake-hit Pakistan-controlled Kashmir got into full gear yesterday with the help of US and German helicopters, but hundreds of thousands of survivors were still desperate for help facing a fifth night out in the cold.

Pakistani army spokesman Major Farooq Nasir said blue skies after torrential downpours on Tuesday had cleared the way for more mercy flights to bring badly needed food and medicine, and take away the injured.

"We are bringing in food, blankets, tents, and rescue teams. The weather has cleared so we're going full-ahead now with the relief operations," Nasir told AFP in this devastated city, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Pakistan has been pledged 350 million dollars in international relief after the weekend earthquake, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said yesterday following talks with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"Our request for financial assistance is receiving 350 million dollars now and growing," Aziz told reporters.

He said a separate government

appeal for donations by Pakistanis had garnered more than one billion rupees (16.6 million dollars).

Aziz was speaking after talks with Rice, who said the US military was coordinating with Pakistan, its ally in the "war on terror", to reach survivors of the quake which left at least 23,000 dead.

Rice said she diverted a tour of Central Asia "to express directly" to President Pervez Musharraf and Aziz how the tragedy has "touched Americans deeply".

"The United States like many other people in the world has been through natural disasters," she said. "Our support is not just for today but tomorrow as well."

The UN appealed for 272 million dollars to help victims of disaster.

Yvette Stevens, the world body's UN assistant emergency relief coordinator, said more would eventually be needed.

Foreign search and rescue teams combing the debris of collapsed buildings in Pakistan were expected to complete work on Wednesday, with efforts shifting to broader relief operations, according to the UN, which is coordinating international aid.

Energy-rich Gulf states also offered emergency aid, with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait giving 200 million dollars in assistance.

Washington pledged up to 50 million dollars in initial assistance for Pakistan.

The European Union, as well as Canada, offered millions in aid.

The offers came as Pakistan said the death toll had reached 23,000 with as many as 60,000 people injured by the 7.6 magnitude quake.

Muzaffarabad bore the brunt of the 7.6-magnitude earthquake which struck on Saturday, killing at least 23,000 people in Pakistan and instantly making some 2.5 million homeless, according to official estimates.

It was the worst natural calamity in Pakistan's history and officials fear the death toll could rise in the days ahead as the rubble is cleared and more bodies are found.

Towns and villages across northern Pakistan and parts of Kashmir have turned into makeshift refugee camps, with shocked survivors huddling under whatever they can find as they wait for aid that many say has been too slow coming.

Nasir said 95 helicopter relief flights had brought vital supplies to the worst-hit regions of Kashmir over the past 24 hours, including 12 in the first few hours of daylight on Wednesday.

Witnesses said the thumping twin-rotors of US army Chinook helicopters, diverted from the war against Taliban insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan, could be heard over Muzaffarabad shortly after sunrise.

"We've seen the foreigners sending in help, but nothing from our own government," said Khurshid Bibi, pointing to her family of 15 camped on the roadside as a Chinook flew overhead.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, who made his first visit to a relief centre here Wednesday, praised the government's response even as men and women fought each other in the streets for the meagre supplies being distributed.

"At the moment we are in a relief and rescue phase. The third phase is rehabilitation ... We have to think of the winter which is just around the corner," he said.

Quake destroyed 40,000 homes in Kashmir: Official

AFP, Srinagar

The earthquake that killed tens of thousands in Kashmir razed 40,720 homes and damaged nearly twice as many in the Indian zone of the Himalayan region, a top official announced Wednesday.

Rescuers had yet to reach 10 outlying villages, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, chief minister of Indian-administered Kashmir, told a news conference.

He said 73,450 houses, mostly made of timber and mud, were partially damaged by the 7.6-strength tremor.

"Our engineers will assess the partially damaged homes to see if they are habitable or not," the chief minister said, adding that the final damage figure was likely to rise.

Some 143,000 people had been affected in two frontier districts alone by Saturday's quake, which claimed 1,300 lives in Indian Kashmir, the minister said.

"The damage is more in Uri (district) where 95 villages comprising of 120,000 inhabitants have been affected," he said, adding that in the northern Kashmiri district of Tangdhar, 23,000 people in 42 villages have been hit.

He did not give details of damage in Indian Kashmir's 12 other districts.

Ten million people live in the state.

Rescuers race against time in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops were fighting a race against time yesterday to deliver aid to thousands of earthquake survivors as rain and snow played havoc with the relief efforts in Kashmir, officials said.

Rescuers and soldiers scoured the devastated mountainous region to deliver tents, food, medicines and blankets as the full extent of the damage to homes in the area emerged.

Indian Kashmir's Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed said the tremor had razed 40,720 homes in two districts of the state.

Rescuers had yet to reach 10 outlying villages, Sayeed told a news conference, adding that 73,450 houses, mostly made of timber and mud, were also partially damaged.

"Our engineers will assess the partially damaged homes to see if they are habitable or not," the chief minister said, adding that the final damage figure was likely to rise.

"The damage is more in Uri where 95 villages comprising of 120,000 inhabitants have been affected," he said, adding that in Tangdhar, 23,000 people in 42 villages have been hit.

He did not give details of damage in Indian Kashmir's 12 other districts.

Saturday's earthquake killed at

least 1,300 people and injured more than 5,000 others in Indian Kashmir. Some 23,000 were killed over the de facto border in Pakistan.

"The death toll we fear is likely to rise as we are still unable to access certain areas," said Vijay Bakaya, who heads the mammoth relief operations from Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

Bakaya told AFP rescuers had reached 42 villages in the northern frontier district of Tangdhar while supplies were being sent to 80 others in the worst-hit Uri district, six km from the Line of Control which divides the two zones of Kashmir.

Quake deals big blow to Kashmir rebels

AFP, Srinagar

Intelligence officials and former guerrillas yesterday said the giant earthquake that killed tens of thousands across divided Kashmir has dealt a blow to rebels in the Himalayan region.

Indian intelligence officials, citing intercepted radio traffic between various guerrilla groups, said rebels in the Pakistani zone of the state were badly hit.

"There are reports of damage to militant camps on the other side of the Line of Control (LoC)," K. Srinivasan, a top intelligence officer from India's Border Security Force told AFP in Srinagar, capital of Indian Kashmir.

About 70 earthquake-related rebel deaths were confirmed by Jamaat-ud-Dawa, formerly the outlawed jihadi

group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The LoC, a heavily-militarised ceasefire line, divides Kashmir between rivals India and Pakistan. Thousands of Indian soldiers guard its snow-blown ridges to prevent Islamist guerrillas from sneaking across.

The Muslim rebels, who launched an armed struggle against Indian rule disputed Kashmir in 1989 that has claimed at least 44,000 lives, are normally active in the summer months when alpine passes are clear of snow.

Srinivasan, who has led counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir, said the damage to rebel camps will make it difficult to sustain operations against Indian troops before the winter snows come.



PHOTO: AFP

Earthquake victims fight for a blanket tossed to them from a relief truck near a makeshift shelter in Muzaffarabad yesterday, four days after a powerful earthquake shocked the region. Around 2.5 million people left homeless by the mammoth quake in South Asia who need urgent help as winter approaches.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Kashmiri earthquake survivors keep themselves warm over a dying fire at Rampur some 90km north-west of Srinagar yesterday. More than 1,300 people were killed and 5,000 others injured in Indian Kashmir, where the October 8 quake flattened more than 40,000 homes and partially destroyed twice that number.

5 Afghan aid workers among 21 killed

AP, Kabul

Fighting across Afghanistan killed 10 suspected rebels, six police and five medical workers, and President Hamid Karzai said yesterday he believes the insurgents are receiving support from the nation's booming drug trade.

The suspected Taliban guerrillas were killed Monday by US warplanes that bombed their hideout in Uruzgan province, which has long been a hotbed of militant activity, local Gov. Jan Mohammed Khan said Wednesday.

US military spokeswoman Sgt. Marina Evans confirmed the attack and said "several of the enemy had been killed."

The six police were killed by suspected Taliban who ambushed their convoy in the same area a day later, Khan said. One officer was still missing

after the attack and feared dead. Reinforcements have been rushed to the area "to hunt down the Taliban," he said.

The attack on the medical workers happened Wednesday near Kandahar city, a former Taliban stronghold, said doctor Abdul Qadir, director of UN and US-sponsored Afghan Help Development Services, a local aid group that employed the five.

Gunmen opened fire on their vehicle as they drove through the desert. Two of the five dead were doctors. Three other medical workers in the vehicle were wounded, Qadir said. The eight were returning to Kandahar after treating refugees in a nearby camp.

Karzai made his comments about the violence in a press conference with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

China launches second manned mission

AFP, Jiuquan

China launched its second manned space mission yesterday, sending two astronauts into orbit as it opened a new chapter in its ambitious drive to become a global space power.

Shenzhou VI, based on Soviet Soyuz technology, lifted off on a Long March 2F carrier rocket from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre at 9:00 am (0100 GMT) for a five-day mission, carrying air force pilots Fei Junlong and Nie Haisheng.

It entered a fixed orbit 21 minutes later.

Having two crew on board is a departure from October 2003, when Yang Liwei spent 21 hours on a solo odyssey -- a mission that made China only the third country after the United States and the former Soviet Union to send a man into space.

"I feel good," said Fei in his first transmission from the craft.

Fei, 40, and Nie, 41, were seen off at the launch pad by Premier Wen Jiabao, who said he believed "the astronauts will accomplish the glorious and sacred mission."

"The entire nation has waited, the entire world is watching the success of the Shenzhou VI manned space launch," he said, adding the "great achievement" would go down "in the annals of the history of the Chinese people."

Amid some concern that China could use space for military purposes, Wen said this was not the case.

"China's entering into the scientific experiment of space flight is entirely for peaceful purposes and is a contribution towards the human race's works in promoting science and peace," he said.

Other top leaders including President Hu Jintao and Vice President Zeng Qinglong watched the event at the Beijing Aerospace Command and Control Centre, Chinese mission control.



PHOTO: AFP

China's Shenzhou VI manned mission into space carrying two astronauts lifts off from the launch pad at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Jiuquan, in China's Gansu province yesterday.

Bali protesters storm jail where bombers kept

AFP, Denpasar

An angry crowd yesterday stormed a prison where some convicted Bali bombers are being held, shouting for their deaths on the third anniversary of the attacks on the Indonesian island.

The 500-strong crowd at Denpasar's Kerobokan jail managed to remove the main steel door from its hinges but police prevented them from getting inside, an AFP correspondent reported.

"Kill Amrozi, kill Amrozi!" the crowd yelled, referring to one of three people sentenced to death by firing squad for the 2002 nightclub bombings which killed 202 people.

Amrozi, Imam Samudra and Mukhlas had been transferred the previous day to a high-security island prison off neighbouring Java island following earlier angry protests.

The confrontation was defused by the arrival of a group of traditional musicians from a nearby village, who positioned themselves between police and protesters.

But the crowd had not yet dispersed.

Iraqi leaders clinch charter deal

Bomber kills 30

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad/Mosul

A suicide bomber blew himself up at an Iraqi army recruitment centre yesterday, killing 30 people in the latest insurgent strike aimed at derailing a weekend vote on the country's new constitution.

The attack came just as political leaders announced concessions over the constitution in a bid to win over the ousted Sunni elite, which had threatened to reject the charter or even boycott Saturday's vote altogether.

The bomber set off his explosives belt in a crowd of people waiting outside the centre in the northwestern Iraqi town of Tal Afar, just a day after another attack there killed 30 people in a crowded market.

Sunni-backed insurgents have already vowed to disrupt the vote on the constitution, a milestone in the war-ravaged political transition following Saddam Hussein's ouster that has deeply divided the country on sectarian lines.

Attacks have continued despite

security being strengthened nationwide for the vote, with the partial closure of some international borders, air and sea ports, traffic restrictions and a weapons ban.

Parliament is due later to endorse a number of amendments to the charter which the now-dominant Shias and Kurds hope will be enough to secure its adoption on Saturday despite lingering Sunni Arab concerns.

Under a deal hammered out late Tuesday after weeks of intensive negotiations, Iraqi leaders have also agreed a mechanism to consider further revisions to the constitution after new elections to be held in December, whatever the result of the referendum.

"I am confident that there will be a consensus on the constitution on the day of the vote," Kurdish President Jalal Talabani said. "The charter... will strengthen the unity of the Iraqi people."

Iraq's Sunni Vice President Ghazi al-Yawar added: "It was done in haste... but it is the best we can do."