

India gives aid groups access to Kashmir

AP, Srinagar

India is letting international relief agencies operate in militarised and formerly forbidden parts of Kashmir, where tens of thousands need help after last week's devastating earthquake, aid workers said yesterday.

Overnight, rain prevented troops from delivering relief supplies to three villages in the area that remained inaccessible a week after the magnitude-7.6 quake struck, officials said.

The decision to allow foreign groups into India's part of Kashmir contrasted with the Dec. 26 Indian Ocean tsunami. After that tragedy, India drew criticism for barring aid workers from hard-hit islands of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, where India's air force has a base.

"So far, we have been able to access all the areas that we have sought access to," said Brian Heidel, the India head of the British group Save the Children, which is helping with relief work in Kashmir.

"I think there's an understanding with the administration and the military that the situation requires an openness," Heidel said.

Rain, cold compound misery of survivors

Thousands more may die of infections as toll nears 40,000

AP, AFP, Muzaffarabad

The death toll in Pakistan's devastating earthquake rose to nearly 40,000 yesterday, while rain, snow and frigidly cold weather compounded the misery of millions of homeless victims.

Heavy rain began falling early yesterday in many quake-hit towns and snow fell in the surrounding mountains, disrupting efforts to help an estimated 2 million people lacking shelter ahead of the harsh Himalayan winter. Downpours earlier in the week had grounded helicopters and stopped trucks loaded with relief supplies.

And with 62,000 lying injured without proper medical care -- many with no care at all -- fears are growing that thousands more could die of infections and other complications in the coming days.

"Several thousand people will die in the next few days. Their wounds have turned septic, they have fractures," Sean Keogh, of Britain-based Medical

Relief International (Merlin), said after travelling on foot through remote areas.

Helicopter relief flights which have been ferrying supplies into the quake zone and ferrying out the injured were halted for about an hour and a half Saturday morning before being resumed, except to the northern town of Balakot where the weather was particularly bad. That left hundreds of injured, cold and terrified people waiting by the helipad, hoping for the weather to clear.

In desperately short supply were what was needed most: tents.

"We have begged for tents from relief workers but they say there are no more," said Rehamatullah, a 70-year-old man who hiked to Balakot from a nearby village, looking for supplies. "We're very worried as our families are staying in the open."

Meanwhile, Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan said the death toll from the Oct. 8 quake had risen to 38,000 with 62,000 others injured. More than 1,350 other people have died in neighboring India.

The official toll, which previously stood at 25,000, rose sharply because more bodies have been pulled from the rubble in recent days, army officials said.

President Gen. Pervez Musharraf said the grim numbers were likely to get worse as rescue and recovery teams reach more communities, some still virtually untouched since the Oct. 8 quake. "I think it will keep rising when we go into the valleys," the president said.

At 8:51 a.m., thousands of Muslims gathered at Islamabad's towering Faisal mosque for special prayers for the dead exactly a week after the temblor.

Prayer leader Qari Nauman Ahmad urged people to donate what they could to quake victims and seek God's forgiveness, saying continuing aftershocks were a sign that God was not

happy.

Early Saturday, a magnitude-5 aftershock struck the quake-hit zone, but there were no immediate reports of damage or further injury. There have been more than 500 aftershocks over the past week.

Rescue workers abandoned the official search Friday for survivors trapped in the rubble, though individual efforts continued, with an 18-month-old girl reportedly pulled out alive from the ruins of her home in the town of Balimang, in North-West Frontier Province.

Four helicopters, two from the International Red Cross and two from the Pakistan army, landed in the devastated Kashmiri city of Muzaffarabad on Saturday morning, and another army spokesman Maj. Farooq Nasir said the relief operation was on but could change with the weather.



PHOTO: AFP

A Kashmiri quake victim shivers in cold while waiting for relief goods during rain in the earthquake-devastated Muzaffarabad yesterday. Heavy rain and cloud halted air operations supplying desperately needed aid to survivors of Pakistan's earthquake after a cold night rocked by new tremors.

Pakistan to accept Israeli aid for quake victims

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday it will accept any financial aid from Israel for victims of the devastating earthquake, as the Islamic republic cautiously warms up to the Jewish state after decades of hostility.

"I think we have already clarified that, and the prime minister has said we have the president's relief fund into which anyone can contribute. There are no restrictions," foreign office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam told AFP.

"If Israel wants to contribute we have no objections," she added.

The move could prove controversial with hardline Islamic parties opposed to any improvement in ties with Israel.

Aslam ruled out the possibility of relief goods from the Jewish state landing in the Islamic Republic directly.

No consignment is expected directly from Israel to Pakistan, she said, adding that Israel could join multilateral efforts to help.

The United Nations had launched an appeal for assistance and "there is likelihood that Israel will contribute funds there", she said.



PHOTO: AFP

Jalil Farq Jamal (front C) waits for his turn to vote in a referendum on a new constitution at a polling station in Al Zubayr, just outside Basra in southern Iraq yesterday. More than 6,000 polling stations have opened across the country amid tight security.

US offers Syria deal to end isolation

AFP, London

The United States has offered Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a deal to end his regime's international isolation if it agrees to a list of concessions, a British newspaper reported yesterday.

The offer was described as a "Gaddafi deal" after the one clinched two years ago with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, whose regime was shunned after being blamed for the bombing of a passenger jet over the Scottish town of Lockerbie.

Citing senior US and Arab officials, The Times newspaper said the latest deal -- which hinges on four key demands -- could save Syria from the threat of looming international sanctions.

It said the matter could be resolved as early as next week when a

UN team investigating the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri is due to submit a report on its findings to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The report's findings are unknown, but The Times said it was widely expected to name senior figures in Syria's intelligence services as being involved.

"Assad is facing a tough time ahead and he had very few friends left," the daily quoted an anonymous, senior Arab diplomat as saying.

"He is desperately looking for a way out of this predicament."

Under the deal, The Times said Washington had four main requirements:

- Syria must cooperate fully and adhere to any demands by the UN inquiry into Hariri's death.

Subversive war rages on in Lanka: Envoy

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military and Tamil Tiger rebels are locked in a subversive war despite a 2002 truce, a top Norwegian envoy has warned, calling on both sides to resume stalled talks to forge a lasting end to 20 years of civil strife.

Major Gen. Trond Furuhoedve, the former head of the team of Nordic monitors who oversee the island's shaky truce, appealed to the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to exercise self-discipline to ensure the ceasefire does not disintegrate.

"This is subversive war," Furuhoedve, visiting Sri Lanka as a special representative of Norway's government, told Sri Lanka's Foreign Correspondents' Association late on Friday.

"Both parties are involved in this,"

he added. "It is alarming. All war is alarming. This is dangerous for the ceasefire and for the country."

Dozens of police, soldiers and rebel cadres have been killed in a rash of attacks in recent months, culminating in the August assassination of the island's foreign minister, but monitors have been unable to pin down proof on who is responsible.

The Tigers and the military alike deny any involvement in the killings, which continued during Furuhoedve's week-long visit, each blaming the violence on the other.

"The parties, as they are involved in a subversive warfare, have to show self-discipline. We believe that peace talks is an alternative which is very useful," Furuhoedve said. "There is no military solution to this conflict, that's for sure."

Hindu-Muslim riots kill 3 in Uttar Pradesh

AFP, Lucknow

Hindus and Muslims fought pitched battles that left three dead and 26 injured in a northern Indian town, the Uttar Pradesh authorities said yesterday after imposing a curfew.

The clashes were ignited Friday night in Mau district, 300 kilometers (200 miles) southeast of Lucknow, when Muslims objected to a Hindu religious ceremony in a Muslim-dominated area.

"Shoot-on-sight orders have been issued and people have been asked to stay indoors after communal rioting killed three persons in Mau," state government spokesman Alok Sinha said.

"Twenty-six others have been injured and they have been admitted to hospital."