

Cancelled flights leave millions in waiting

6 Pak soldiers killed as chopper crashes

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Heavy rains forced the cancellation of nearly all helicopter aid flights yesterday, leaving millions of destitute and drenched earthquake survivors waiting in the Pakistani mountains for aid that could mean life or death.

More than a week after the October 8 earthquake, which tore apart entire villages, much of the relief aid was just trickling in to the neediest areas. Aid workers looked for donkeys and mules to get them through.

In Muzaffarabad, the ravaged Kashmiri city where nearly half of Pakistan's 39,422 earthquake victims died, only two choppers braved the foul weather which brought new misery to the country's more than three million homeless.

The helicopters were cancelled a day after the massive aid operation saw its first accident. Six Pakistani military

personnel died when their chopper crashed near the Kashmiri town of Bagh.

Relief flights were also called off on the Indian side of divided Kashmir where at least 1,329 people died in the earthquake, an Indian army officer said.

Pakistani Major Fayaz Ali said the only choppers to fly in Muzaffarabad Sunday were from the German military, which sent engineers to repair a remote road and bring back injured, and from the Aga Khan Foundation charity.

"It's cloudy and there is no clear air route," Ali said.

"The day is not completely lost. Some relief goods were sent by road."

Relief workers said there was no time to spare because thousands were at risk of dying unless they got help -- particularly shelter.

"It's a logistical nightmare," said Alain Pasche, coordinator of UN relief

operations in Muzaffarabad.

"Especially so in the little villages and for the people who are coming into Muzaffarabad. The situation is catastrophic here," he told AFP.

In the villages, "the problem is that we don't have any toll. We don't know the exact population or their needs. There is a lack of means. The army stocks are all under the rubble," he said.

So far four countries -- the United States, Germany, Japan and impoverished neighbour Afghanistan -- have responded to Pakistan's request for helicopters but the Japanese choppers are not yet in operation, officials said.

Keith Ursel of the World Food Program said the UN agency has distributed 40 tons (tonnes) of high-energy biscuits but it was still waiting to hand out 500 tons per day of traditional-food rations including lentils, wheat, tea, dates and sugar.

"It's too slow and too difficult. We'll

get horses and donkeys today hopefully," he said.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees was also just beginning its work in Pakistani Kashmir after conducting an aerial assessment Saturday, UNHCR official Joseph Robinson said.

The supplies are coming in more than a week after the earthquake despite repeated warnings that thousands face disease or even death unless they urgently get help.

The latest note of alarm came from Balakot in North West Frontier Province, where a doctor said a catastrophe could be underway in the remote mountains.

"It's absolutely urgent right now to send tents to give people shelter. If nothing is done there will be thousands of deaths" in mountain villages, said Thierry Velu, head of the French aid group Groupe de Secours Catastrophe Francais.

Kashmir politicians call for border opening

AFP, Srinagar

Politicians in the Indian and Pakistani zones of Kashmir yesterday called for the militarised ceasefire Line of Control to be opened for relief operations in the earthquake-hit state.

"We urge India and Pakistan to throw open the Line of Control so that we can take relief to our affected brethren in the other part of Kashmir," said Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Indian Kashmir's top moderate separatist.

"The issue should be viewed as a humanitarian one," he said.

More than 1,300 people were killed on the Indian side and tens of thousands of homes were destroyed. In neighbouring Pakistan, where the 7.6-magnitude earthquake was centered, at least 38,000 people were killed and more than two million made homeless.

On Tuesday Indian Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed urged the federal government to allow direct shipments of earthquake aid collected by local charities to the Pakistani-zone of the state.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Kashmiris sit in a makeshift tent village in Balakot, in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province yesterday. The 7.6-magnitude quake which struck Pakistan-controlled Kashmir on October 8 killed nearly 40,000 people and has left some 3.3 million homeless.

Migration the only solution for some quake victims

AFP, Muzaffarabad

The last time teacher Arif Kiyani was getting ready for school, he was having his morning shave when the earth opened underneath him, engulfing his children.

He doesn't know when and where he will make it back to work. All he knows is that it won't be in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir now in ruins from the earthquake.

"I have no idea now what to do but I will never rebuild my house. I will go somewhere else," the 32-year-old said amidst sobs.

"How could I live in this vulnerable place in the future? It has already eaten my two sons, a sister and many relatives," he said.

Many of the people in Muzaffarabad and other cities left homeless by the earthquake are planning to leave forever as the trauma is too great and they don't see any future here.

At least 11,000 people died in Muzaffarabad of the more than 38,000 people who perished in Pakistan in the October 8 earthquake. Another 1,300 died in India, which also rules part of Kashmir.

Kiyani said that when the earthquake struck, he at first thought that India had attacked.

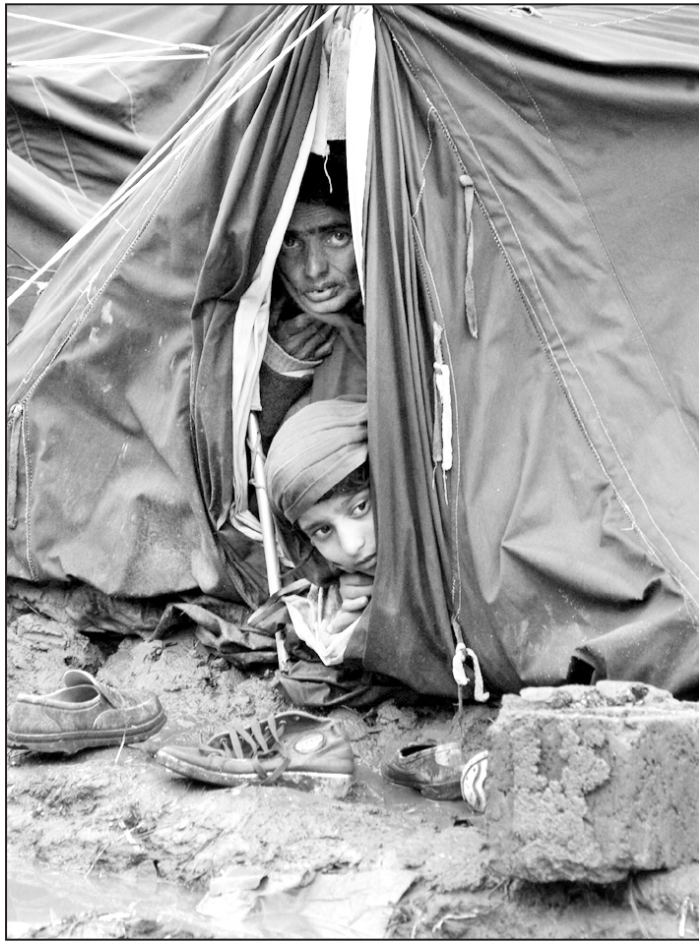


PHOTO: AFP
Indian Kashmiri children peer out from a tent in Salamabad, some 115 km north-west of Srinagar yesterday. Rain and aftershocks continued to hamper relief operations for those left homeless by a massive 7.6 level earthquake that hit the region on October 8.

KASHMIR SURVIVORS SAY

Politicians divert quake relief

AFP, Srinagar

Earthquake survivors in Indian Kashmir, where the delivery of relief supplies remains patchy in remote villages, complained yesterday that political parties have disrupted distribution efforts.

"Our village has not received any government relief so far as we had voted for the opposition during the last elections," says Farooq Ahmed, a resident of Garkote village in northern Uri sector.

"We are being victimised for our political ideologies," he said, adding that whatever relief they received was from separatists and local charities.

A government official involved in the relief operation, who did not want to be named, acknowledged that at least one senior Kashmir state minister was interfering in relief distribution in the two worst-hit areas of Uri and Tangdar.

"There is interference and it is affecting our operations," he said. "We are being asked to take care of a particular area, which is not good."

The 7.6-magnitude earthquake, which hit October 8 destroyed or damaged more than 100,000 houses in Indian Kashmir and left more than

1,300 people dead.

The federal government pledged 150 million dollars in immediate relief and 2,300 dollars each for people to rebuild homes while charities have rushed supplies of food and medicine.

Many villagers have spent days in freezing temperatures without adequate shelter, clothing or food since the earthquake hit and heavy rains and snowfall at high elevations Sunday halted Indian airforce helicopter relief missions.

"No relief flights could take off today (Sunday) due to bad weather," an Indian army officer told AFP.

Kashmir's leading woman politician, Mehbooba Mufti, toured the quake zone Sunday and stressed the need for more than 35,000 tents to protect people from the rain and cold. She said the state has only managed to obtain 6,000 tents so far.

"It has been raining since last night and we have no tents to cover ourselves," said 55-year-old Jamal-u-Din from quake-hit Uri sector.

Villagers near the Line of Control which divides the state between India and Pakistan said soldiers and police, normally mistrusted, have been more equitable in relief distribution.

37 dead, 40 missing as boat sinks in UP

AFP, Lucknow

At least 37 people died and about 40 were missing after an overcrowded boat carrying farm labourers capsized on the Ganges River in northern India, an official said yesterday.

The boat, which had a capacity of 50 passengers, was carrying twice that number when it overturned Saturday in Ballia, 350km southeast of Lucknow, the state capital of Uttar Pradesh, he said.

"Divers have so far fished out 37 bodies while the search is on for the 40 missing," home department secretary Alok Sinha told AFP.

"The boat was overcrowded and was carrying labourers who were returning to Ballia after a day's work," Sinha said.

"Initial inquiry suggests that water entered into the boat and it overturned. A few passengers jumped into the river and swam to safety," he said adding 20 passengers had managed to swim ashore.

Afghan polls staffers fired for fraud

AP, Kabul

A UN-backed election commission has dismissed about 50 of its staff for suspected fraud in last month's legislative polls, officials said Sunday, raising fears for the legitimacy of Afghanistan's final formal step toward democracy.

Some 680 ballot boxes, about 3 percent of the total, have been taken out of the counting process because of suspicions they were stuffed, said Richard Atwood, chief of operations for the joint UN-Afghan election commission.

But he said, "the fraud that has occurred does not affect the integrity of the election" and he ruled out a recount.

"The fraud is not systematic or widespread across the country," Atwood told reporters in Kabul. Election organizers have "done all we can to ensure this fraud is caught."