

Tornado ravages Florida

19 people killed as hundreds of homes damaged

REUTERS, Orlando

Severe thunderstorms and at least one tornado killed 19 people on Friday when they ripped through Florida in the dead of night, tearing homes to shreds, toppling heavy trucks and leaving a trail of rubble. More than 1,500 homes, buildings and churches were damaged or destroyed across a wide area of central Florida north of the tourism region around Orlando. But two of the area's biggest attractions, Walt Disney Co.'s Disney World and Universal Studios Florida, were not affected.

Rescue teams fanned out to search for people who might still be trapped under flattened homes. Crunched cars were flung onto porches, and battered sofas and fridges stood in piles of debris scattered over the exposed concrete foundations of houses. Dusk till dawn curfews were put into effect in two areas to deter looters. The storm hit at 3:15 am (0815

GMT) and a spokesman for the Lake County sheriff's office said at least one and perhaps two tornadoes touched down in a state that ranks only behind the infamous "Tornado Alley" in the US Midwest for the number of tornado strikes. Most, such as a twister near Orlando on Christmas Day last year, cause no fatalities. "The death toll is up to 19 now," said Kevin Lenhart, spokesman for the Lake County emergency operations centre. Another 19 people were in hospital. The emergency centre said six were killed in Lady Lake, about 40 miles northwest of Orlando, and 13 in nearby Paisley, on the edge of the Ocala National Forest. Pastor Howard Roszak of the First Baptist Church in Paisley said two teenage boys who belonged to his church were killed. One of the boys died along with his father, while both parents of the other teen were killed. "I know all these kids real good. I

love these kids. I hear there is nothing left ... just absolutely nothing," Roszak said, referring to the home of one of the boys. Sen Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat, compared the devastation to a "total war zone about 300 yards wide, about three football fields." "The last thing we saw before lifting off was a little fawn whose rear leg was just dangling, limping off on three legs into the woods," he said after a helicopter tour. About 1,000 tornadoes hit the United States annually, killing on average 80 people a year, and winter tornadoes appear to be more prevalent during El Nino years, when the waters of the eastern Pacific become unusually warm. "This is something that we've seen here in the past in our state when we've had El Nino conditions in place," said state meteorologist Ben Nelson. In February 1998, another El Nino year, a swarm of tornadoes killed more than 40 people in central

Florida and injured scores more. One narrowly missed the crowded tourist area that includes Disney, Universal Studios and Sea World. The National Weather Service said it believed more than one tornado touched down on Friday but had yet to ascertain that. Florida Highway Patrol spokeswoman Kim Miller said the tornado blew over five tractor-trailer rigs at about 3:45 a.m. "We saw tractor-trailers littered all over the interstate," she told CNN. "We had a few cars mixed into that." The storm knocked out power to more than 42,000 customers but only 7,800 were still without electricity by mid-afternoon, an official with the local utility, Progress Energy, said. Florida Gov. Charlie Crist declared a state of emergency in four affected counties and the Red Cross opened shelters for people left homeless.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents look through debris from their homes destroyed by a tornado Friday in Lady Lake, Florida. At least 19 people were killed by tornadoes and electrical storms that hit central Florida Friday as crews searched the area for more victims.

50 killed in Philippines tanker blast

AP, Manila

The death toll from a tanker explosion in the southern Philippines has risen from 27 to 50 after authorities accounted for the remains of more victims, officials said Saturday. At least 65 others were hospitalised, said provincial social welfare officer Conchita San Diego. Many of the victims were passengers of a minibus that was following the tanker truck or motorists who were slowed down by the traffic caused by the accident, San Diego said. The tanker truck was negotiating a downhill stretch of the highway in Tigbao town in Zamboanga del Sur province Friday when its brakes failed, causing it to slam into the side of the mountain before overturning and killing its driver, police said. Minutes later, someone shouted there was a fire from beneath the truck, but before people could flee, the tanker exploded with such force that it completely demolished the vehicle and blew away the roof of the minibus.



PHOTO: AFP

A man carries his two daughters walking with his wife (L) as they flee from their home while search and rescue teams evacuate flood victims in Tangerang, some 20km west of Jakarta yesterday.

Musharraf urges both Pakistan & India to stay firm on peace

REUTERS, Rawalpindi

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said on Friday Pakistan and India should stay steadfast against hardliners and militants opposed to a peace process between the two old rivals. Musharraf told a news conference relations with India had never been better and he was "reasonably optimistic" about their three-year-old peace process but there was a danger of setbacks. "I think there is good optimism towards a resolution but we have to tread the ground carefully so that we don't slide back," he said. The nuclear-armed neighbours have fought three wars since their independence in 1947 and nearly went to war a fourth time in 2002. Tension has eased since they began peace talks in early 2004 but progress has been slow, including on their core dispute over the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir, where Muslim militants have been fighting Indian rule since 1989. Musharraf, in an apparent reference to the militants who have for

years enjoyed Pakistani support, said some people were opposed to the peace process. "We cannot take the people who are on confrontationist course, who think that it is only military, it is only militancy, which will solve the problem," he said. "They can't be on board. So they will remain opposed to whatever we do and they will create all obstacles. We have to be steadfast against what they all do." Musharraf's remarks came after a top separatist leader from Kashmir, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, called during a visit to Pakistan last month for the militant groups to support the peace process. Suspected Muslim militants on Wednesday threw a grenade at Farooq's office in Srinagar. No one was hurt. Last month, the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers met in Islamabad reviving momentum in the peace process that had been stalled by deadly bomb blasts in Mumbai in July. The blasts were blamed on militants linked to Pakistan.

ME quartet backs US effort to revive talks

US to support 10,000 extra Abbas troops

REUTERS, Washington

The quartet of Middle East peace brokers backed a US push to revive Israeli-Palestinian talks on Friday but voiced deep concern about violence among Palestinians that threatens to undermine the effort. The group, which includes the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States, disagreed over the US policy of isolating the Hamas-led Palestinian government and Syria, which Russia said was "counterproductive." The United States is making a fresh effort to promote peace at a time when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government is weak and the power struggle between Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas and President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah has erupted into street clashes between their forces. Fighting between rival

Palestinian factions escalated across Gaza on Friday, killing at least 17 people as Hamas overran compounds used by Abbas's forces and two major universities were set ablaze. "The quartet expressed its deep concern at the violence among Palestinians and called for respect for law and order," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, reading a statement on behalf of the quartet. At least 23 Palestinians have been killed and more than 200 wounded in the last 24 hours of internal fighting, making some analysts deeply sceptical of broader US-led peace efforts. "It needs to stop," Rice said of the violence but argued it should not delay work toward a broader peace deal that could someday lead to a Palestinian state. Rice plans to meet Olmert and Abbas soon to sketch out how they might work on peace. The group reaffirmed a year-old

international aid embargo against the Hamas-led government unless it renounces violence, recognises Israel and respects past peace deals. The United States will expand assistance to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to include about 8,500 members of his national security forces and possibly 1,000 Fatah fighters based in Jordan, US documents show. Providing non-lethal equipment and training to units of Abbas's National Security Forces, and possibly the Jordan-based Badr Brigade could increase Washington's role in the power struggle between Abbas's Fatah faction and the governing Hamas movement. US assistance has largely been limited until now to around 4,000 members of Abbas's presidential guard.



Hillary promises to end war if elected

AP, Washington

Sen Hillary Rodham Clinton said Friday she would not have attacked Iraq if she were president in 2002 and would end the war if elected, as she tried to blunt rivals like John Edwards who are stoking anti-war passions in the Democratic Party. Clinton, raising her voice at one point to be heard above anti-war hecklers, suggested that calls from Edwards and others to cut off funding for President Bush's troop increase are unlikely to win approval in a narrowly divided Senate. "Believe me, I understand the frustration and the outrage," Clinton said in a speech to the Democratic National Committee meeting that brought the party's nine White House hopefuls together for the first time.

Nepali ethnic group demands autonomy

Curfew remains in place

AFP, Kathmandu

An ethnic group in southeastern Nepal demanded yesterday that the region be turned into an autonomous state to end two weeks of unrest that has claimed at least 13 lives. The Mahadhesi ethnic community, which makes up a third of Nepal's 27 million population, has long complained of discrimination and being shut out of power. "We want an autonomous Mahadhesi state that includes the right to self-determination," said Upendra Yadhav, leader of the Mahadhesi Janadhikar (People's Rights) Forum, told AFP on Saturday. The call came as three towns remained under curfew to head off more ethnic violence that has killed at least 13 people and injured dozens in the fertile but impoverished Terai lowlands bordering India. No incidents were reported.

Yadhav said the group put the demands late Friday to Nepali Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala at a meeting and he gave a "positive" response. But Yadhav said that further talks with the government would only be possible if Nepal's Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula resigns. He accused Sitaula of failing to check allegedly excessive force used against Mahadhesi demonstrators over the past two weeks. On Friday, the government set up a committee of three ministers to try to end the unrest. Earlier in the week, the premier promised the region would be allocated more seats in a future parliament based on its population and that the country would have a new federal system.

Global warming report sparks calls for action

AFP, Paris

A hard-hitting report Friday by a UN panel of experts on global warming drew calls for concerted global action, with UN chief Ban Ki-moon urging a much more rapid and determined response. In the United States, the world's biggest polluter, Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman said the report confirmed what President George W. Bush had said about "the nature of climate change, and it reaffirms the need for continued US leadership in addressing global climate issues." Ban said the report "highlights the scientific consensus regarding the quickening and threatening pace of human-induced climate change." "The global response therefore needs to move much more rapidly as well, and with more determination," the UN secretary general said in a statement. The Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change (IPCC) -- the UN's top scientific authority on global warming -- delivered its starkest warning yet at a conference in Paris. The UN body's report, its first for six years, said fossil fuel pollution would raise temperatures this century, worsen floods, droughts and hurricanes, melt polar ice and damage the climate system for a thousand years to come. South African Environment Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk urged Bush to hear the "growing groundswell of opinion in that country (United States)" and to join the global effort to curb global warming. Bodman said the US government under Bush "is taking action to curb the growth of greenhouse gas emissions and encouraging the development and deployment of clean energy technologies here in the United States and across the globe."



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian children play next to damaged cars outside a base used by members loyal to leader Mahmud Abbas' Fatah party in Gaza City yesterday. Fighting between warring Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip raged overnight and into Saturday morning, wounding eight people and shattering an embryonic ceasefire.

US intelligence paints gloomy picture of Iraq

REUTERS, Baghdad

US intelligence experts painted a gloomy picture of Iraq, saying in a report seen on Friday sectarian bloodshed had surpassed the threat from al-Qaeda and warning of the consequences of a rapid US withdrawal. The report emerged at the end of a week in which several hundred people were killed in violence, including 270 killed near the town of Najaf when US and Iraqi forces battled what Iraqi officials say were members of a shadowy sect. The National Intelligence Estimate report, parts of which were obtained by Reuters, described a serious situation, with Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence having surpassed al-Qaeda activities. It said elements of the conflict could be called "civil war." "The term 'civil war' does not adequately capture the complexity of the conflict in Iraq," said the report. "Nonetheless, the term 'civil war' accurately describes key elements of the Iraqi conflict." US President George W. Bush's administration has steadfastly avoided using the term "civil war,"

which could heighten already growing calls for an early withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Portions of the 90-page report seen by Reuters predicted the situation in Iraq would worsen unless efforts were made to reverse conditions. Bush said in January he would send 21,500 additional US troops to Iraq in an effort to get a grip on the sectarian killings and insurgent attacks, especially in Baghdad. The increase in troops -- on top of some 130,000 US troops already in Iraq -- is widely seen as a final attempt to avert all-out sectarian civil war between Iraq's Shia Muslim majority and Sunnis once dominant under Saddam Hussein. The report said a rapid withdrawal of US forces would lead to massive civilian casualties and the possible intervention by Iraq's neighbours, including a military incursion by Turkey. It said the Iraqi government would be unlikely to survive as a non-sectarian institution and that al-Qaeda would use parts of Iraq to plan attacks inside and outside the country.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (3-L) inspects a 152-mm rebel artillery gun at the former Tamil Tiger rebel stronghold of Vakarai yesterday. Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse visited a former Tamil Tiger bastion and offered fresh peace talks to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.