

Heavy rain in south India kills 45

31 others drown as boats sink

AP, Hyderabad/ Lucknow

Heavy rains and flooding killed at least 45 people in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and left nearly 100 children stranded on the roof of their school, a top government official said yesterday.

The worst affected district in the state was Kurnool where 21 people died, state Chief Minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy told reporters before leaving for an aerial survey of the affected areas.

The other deaths took place in Prakasham, Guntur and Krishna districts, Reddy said.

Most people were killed when flash floods destroyed homes and swept them away, he added.

The meteorological office in state capital Hyderabad said heavy rain which began Friday was expected to continue across the state for the next two days.

Parts of Nandyal town in Kurnool district, 175 miles south of Hyderabad, were submerged in up to four feet of water. Nearly 100 school children were stranded on the roof of their school building, Reddy said.

More than 20,000 people in the rain-ravaged areas have been moved to over 50 relief camps, he added.

Meanwhile, twelve members of a

wedding party were among 31 feared drowned overnight in two separate boat accidents in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, officials said on Saturday.

"Two passenger boats sank killing 31 people in two different incidents," Anupam Shashank, a senior government official told the Associated Press from the state capital Lucknow. He said only five bodies had been recovered.

In the first incident, 19 people drowned when an overcrowded boat carrying 25 people sank mid-stream in the Yamuna river near Kaushambhi district, 25km south-east of Lucknow.

Six people swam to safety but the others drowned, Shashank said.

In the second incident a boat carrying 17 members of a wedding party sank in the Ganges river near Mirzapur, 320km southeast of Lucknow.

"Twelve people are feared dead and five swam to safety," said Deputy Inspector General SN Sabat. "Initial reports suggest that the boat was overloaded. Besides people, it was carrying marriage gifts, including a motorcycle and a double bed."

The bride and groom survived as they were travelling in another boat, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers move through floodwaters in a local boat at Allampur village in Kurnool district, some 212km from Hyderabad yesterday. Three days of heavy rain and flash floods had left 45 people dead and forced more than 55,000 from their homes in India's southern Andhra Pradesh state, according to official figures released.

Rocket kills 9 in Pakistan

Blast kills 4 soldiers

AFP, Miranshah

A rocket fired by coalition forces in Afghanistan killed at least nine civilians in a nearby Pakistani tribal area when it hit their home, an official said yesterday.

The casualties occurred in North Waziristan tribal district's Mangreti village on the border with Afghanistan late Friday as Afghan and coalition forces conducted an operation against insurgents, they said.

"Afghan and coalition forces were conducting an operation against militants and a few rockets came in our area. One of the rockets hit a house in which nine people were killed," Pakistan military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

Local residents said the dead included a child, a woman and seven men, all from the same family.

"We have protested the incident and asked explanation from Afghan and coalition forces," Arshad said.

Meanwhile, four paramilitary soldiers were killed Saturday in a restive Pakistani tribal area bordering Afghanistan when their vehicle hit an explosive device, officials said.

The soldiers were clearing the area in Karam Kot village, in North Waziristan, early Saturday as a military convoy was due to pass, a security official told AFP.

Hamas offers talks with rival Fatah

Abbas orders probe into Gaza fiasco

AFP, Gaza City

The Hamas masters of the Gaza Strip called for talks with their defeated rivals Saturday, an appeal swiftly rejected by the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, which set up an inquiry into the rout of its security forces.

Dismissed Hamas premier Ismail Haniya made the appeal in a telephone conversation with Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, his first public contact with a foreign leader since the Islamists' bloody seizure of Gaza earlier this month.

Haniya said he wanted a return to the provisions of the power-sharing accord agreed by president Mahmud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in the Muslim holy city of Mecca in February under the auspices of Yemen's powerful neighbour Saudi Arabia, his office said.

"The way out of the present crisis is through inter-Palestinian dialogue without preconditions on the basis of no winner, no loser; a government of national unity; and respect for the Mecca agreement," his office quoted him as saying.

But Haniya's appeal was swiftly rejected by the Palestinian leader-

ship, which said there could be no dialogue without the Islamists' being held to account for their routing of the security forces in Gaza in a week of ferocious fighting in which more than 110 people were killed.

"Before any return to dialogue, there must be a return to full legality within the framework of the Palestinian Authority and those who carried out a putsch and attacked legal institutions must be held to account," Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

The Palestinian president meanwhile set up a commission of inquiry into the defeat of his security forces in Gaza as he sacked a second commander over the debacle.

"(Abbas) today ordered the formation of a commission of inquiry into the shortcomings in the Gaza Strip that failed to prevent the armed revolt by militias of the Hamas movement against Palestinian legitimacy and institutions," an official statement said.

The commission will be headed by Zakariya al-Agha, a Fatah leader from Gaza.

Abbas also fired Colonel Suleiman Khader, a commander in the central Gaza Strip, accusing him of "cowardice" after he handed over

a base to Hamas forces without a fight, the statement said.

He was the second commander to face dismissal after the security forces' defeat to Hamas, who captured control of the entire Gaza Strip on June 15.

On Friday the president sacked Rashid Abu Shbak, who was for more than a year his director of internal security -- an umbrella formation of preventive security, police and civil defence.

Appointed to the post in April 2006, Abu Shbak had submitted his resignation on May 26 but Abbas refused to accept his departure at the time.

Hamas meanwhile reacted angrily to recommendations by the Palestine Liberation Organisation that early elections should be held under changed rules that would effectively exclude the Islamists.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum described the proposal from the PLO central council, a body of which his movement is not a member, as "something, which should be condemned."

Karzai blasts Nato for civilian deaths

52 civilians killed in raids

AP, AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday accused Nato and US-led forces of carelessly killing civilians in recent operations, and suggested the international community considered Afghan lives to be "cheap."

Such operations "will have no benefit for Afghanistan," Karzai said at a news conference.

"Several times in the last year, Afghan government tried to prevent civilian casualties, but our innocent people are becoming victims of careless operations of Nato and international forces," Karzai said in a mixture of English and his native Pashto.

Foreign forces killed 52 civilians in a three-day operation in southern Afghanistan this week, President Hamid Karzai said Saturday.

"In Chora, Nato, coalition forces fired artillery on Chora from Tirin Kot in which according to our latest information ... 52 of our countrymen were martyred," Karzai said.

The Nato force said Karzai's figure for the number of civilian dead

was similar to its own but that it was unclear if they had been killed by security forces or Taliban fighters.

Provincial councillor Mawlawi Hamdullah said Monday that the fighting, which started in the Chora district of the southern province of Uruzgan last Saturday, was estimated to have left up to 60 civilians dead.

Fire from foreign forces killed most of them, and 100 more wounded were in hospital in the provincial capital Tirin Kot, he said.

The death toll was never confirmed although the interior ministry said 10 civilians were killed by Taliban.

In all, he said 90 civilians had died in foreign-led operations in the past 10 days.

About 50 Taliban were also killed in last Saturday's fighting, Hamdullah said.

Chora district falls under the command of the Dutch deployment to the 37-nation International Security Assistance Force, which lost a soldier to fighting there.



PHOTO: AFP

India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and Leftist parties presidential candidate 72-year-old Pratibha Patil (2-L) arrives at parliament house to file her nomination papers for the forthcoming Indian presidential election with UPA chairperson and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi yesterday.

US, North Korea set July timeline to shut reactor

AP, Tokyo

The top US nuclear negotiator arrived in Japan Saturday to discuss his surprise visit to North Korea, which he said yielded an agreement that could lead to a shutdown of the communist state's plutonium-producing reactor in July.

Christopher Hill the chief US negotiator at international talks on North Korea's nuclear programmes said that the Yongbyon reactor would be shutdown after the North and the UN's nuclear watchdog agree on how to monitor the process.

"We expect this to be soon, but probably within three weeks ... though I don't want to be pinned down on a date," Hill told reporters in Tokyo, after briefing his Japanese counterpart on the outcome of his two-day surprise trip to the North Korea capital. Hill told CNN on Friday that the shutdown could be expected "within two weeks" of the arrival there next week of UN inspectors, putting the date sometime in July.

Pakistan radicals release Chinese 'brothel' workers

AFP, Islamabad

Students from a radical mosque released yesterday nine hostages who had earlier been taken from an alleged brothel in the Pakistani capital, a mosque leader said.

"After the administration assured us they would close down the massage parlours in Islamabad, and in view of the Pakistan-China friendship, we are releasing all nine men and women," said Abdul Rashid Ghazi, deputy head of the mosque.

Students from the pro-Taliban Red Mosque raided the acupuncture and massage clinic, which they said was a brothel, early on Saturday kidnapping nine people, including six Chinese women.

"This is a natural reaction of students against vulgarity and obscenity. Foreign girls at the massage centre were having sinful acts with men," the students said before the hostages were released.