

Huge aftershocks rock Indonesia

The quake was not as bad as feared first

AFP, Bengkulu

Huge aftershocks rumbled across Indonesia's Sumatra island on Thursday but officials said damage from a massive quake that killed 10 people was not as bad as first feared.

As another powerful quake struck a few thousand kilometres (miles) away, authorities sought to ferry aid supplies to villages and outlying areas where scores of homes were flattened.

But it appeared the country had been spared the scale of devastation first feared when the 8.4-magnitude quake struck at dusk Wednesday -- welcome news for terrified residents who had spent the night outdoors.

Officials however warned the death toll could still rise. In many places, telephone lines and elec-

tricity were down, and emergency teams were racing to remote areas to assess the extent of casualties and damage.

The quake was strong enough to shake buildings in Thailand and Malaysia and triggered a tsunami alert as far away as East Africa, raising memories of the December 2004 catastrophe that killed 220,000 people.

It struck on the eve of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and was followed Thursday by dozens of aftershocks and several tsunami warnings.

Meanwhile another quake hit the northern tip of Sulawesi on Thursday with a magnitude of 6.2, according to the US Geological Survey, some 2,700 kilometres (1,690 miles) to the east of the Sumatra epicentre.

It prompted another tsunami

warning, but there were no initial reports of damage and the alert was later lifted.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla expressed his relief at the lack of damage from Wednesday's quake.

"Yesterday we expected massive destruction. But from the reports coming in this morning we are grateful that the damage is not as big as we thought," he told a press briefing.

Many residents said it was a miracle there had been so few casualties.

Officials in Bengkulu, closest to the epicentre of Wednesday's undersea quake, said six people had been killed in the area. Four were killed elsewhere, while dozens more were injured.

"It's a miracle that nobody in this village was killed," said 42-year-old Mukhtar, a resident of the nearby village of Kota Agung where scores

of homes collapsed.

Many people said they believed they had survived because they rushed out of their homes as soon as they felt the ground rocking.

But Hartini, 35, said her family now had nothing left.

"I rushed out of my house as I felt a soft shaking," she added. "But then the shaking grew stronger and stronger, and in seconds, in minutes, my house collapsed. It was completely flattened."

"I'm already a poor person and with this tragedy I'm becoming poorer," she said. "I don't know what to do."

More than 130 buildings or homes collapsed in the quake while nearly 4,000 other were seriously or partially damaged across Bengkulu, a provincial official at the disaster control centre said.



PHOTO: AFP

Resident of Kota Agung, lantin, salvages items from her home after a quake damaged her newly built house at Air Besi in North Bengkulu yesterday, a day after a massive 8.4 magnitude earthquake shook the region and sowed panic as far away as East Africa.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) greets US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday. Negroponte also nearly held two hours talks with President Pervez Musharraf and discussed counter-terrorism issues.

Sunni sheikh fighting Qaeda in Iraq killed

AFP, Baghdad

Top Sunni sheikh Sattar Abu Reesha, who spearheaded a fight against al-Qaeda, was killed by a bomb on Thursday just 10 days after US President George W. Bush shook his hand when he visited Iraq.

The attack came hours before Bush was due to make a televised address detailing Washington's future strategy in war-torn Iraq.

Abu Reesha was killed near his home in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province and the region touted by the US military as a success in its fight against al-Qaeda in Iraq, the local affiliate of Osama bin Laden's jihadist group.

The US military confirmed the killing.

"I can confirm that he was killed in front of his house from an explosion from a roadside bomb," military spokesman Major Winfield S. Danielson told AFP.

Anbar security chief Tareq al-

Dulaimi said Abu Reesha "was returning home when his convoy was hit by a roadside bomb planted by insurgents. His car was hit directly."

One bodyguard also died in the attack that marked a bloody start to the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Iraqi Sunnis began Ramadan on Thursday while Shias will begin observing the fasting month from Friday.

Dulaimi told state television that the sheikh while on his way home ordered his convoy to stop so he could help a handicapped man sitting by the roadside.

"Soon after he got back in his car the bomb exploded," the police chief said.

Bush had said during his lightning stopover on September 3 that a reduction in US combat troops in Iraq was possible due to progress on the security front in Anbar, achieved largely due to the fight declared by local sheikhs against al-Qaeda.

Time running out for deal: Benazir

AP, Islamabad

Time is running out for President Gen Pervez Musharraf to finalise a pact with ex-premier Benazir Bhutto that would keep the US-allied leader in office, Benazir's party warned yesterday.

Musharraf and Benazir have been trying for months to secure an agreement that would allow her to return from exile and help Musharraf get another term. But with the presidential election due in less than five weeks, the two sides have yet to resolve crucial differences on how they might share power.

"The ball is in the court of the government, and the time has almost completely run out," said Farhatullah Babar, spokesman for Benazir's Pakistan People's Party. "The window is not completely shut, but no agreement has been reached."

Musharraf's authority has eroded since March when he tried unsuccessfully to oust the Supreme Court's top judge and a pact with Benazir could help him overcome expected legal challenges to another run.

Benazir wants authorities to drop corruption cases pending against her and insists Musharraf must step down as army chief. However, Musharraf's political allies are resisting her demands and want Musharraf to retain much of his sweeping powers.

On Monday, Nawaz Sharif, another two-time prime minister and a key opposition leader, was sent back to exile in Saudi Arabia shortly after he landed in Islamabad on a self-proclaimed mission to oust Musharraf and restore civilian rule.

Babar said that Benazir, who left Pakistan in 1999 over the corruption allegations, will return "irrespective of what the regime does"

and will announce her arrival date on Friday as planned.

Sharif flew in from London on Monday after seven years abroad, but was quickly expelled. Authorities rounded up more than 1,000 of his supporters to prevent them from giving the former premier a rousing welcome at Islamabad airport.

Provincial authorities started releasing the supporters in time for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins in Pakistan on Friday, Interior Ministry spokesman Brig. Javed Iqbal Cheema said.

The releases were ordered by Musharraf, the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan reported. The president "wished every Pakistani to observe Ramadan with due solemnity and in true spirit of tolerance and forbearance," APP quoted a presidential spokesman as saying.

Abe hospitalised as Japan PM's race gets underway

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was hospitalised with exhaustion Thursday as his finance minister kick-started the race to succeed him by declaring his candidacy for the top job.

Abe needs to stay in hospital for three or four days because of fatigue and an intestinal disorder, his doctor said.

"The cause is physical fatigue and mental stress," the doctor, Toshifumi Hibi, told throngs of reporters waiting at the hospital in Tokyo where Abe was admitted.

Abe's health has deteriorated since his party's major defeat in upper house elections on July 29. He has been receiving intravenous fluids and was visited by the treating doctor three times in the past week, Hibi revealed.

"It's been about a month since the symptom was observed, but his condition rapidly worsened in the past few days," he said.

EU plan for immigrant 'blue card' to be unveiled in Oct

AFP, Brussels

The European Union's top justice official said yesterday that he would submit next month his plans for an EU "blue card", inspired by the US "green card", to attract qualified immigrants to the bloc.

Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini, in a speech at an immigration conference in Lisbon, said he would unveil his "Blue EU Labour Card" to the 27-country EU on October 23 to help entice qualified job-seekers to Europe.

"The challenge is to attract the workers needed to fill specific gaps," he said, noting that only five percent of people who migrate to the EU are skilled workers, compared to 55 percent arriving in the United States.

The "blue card", which takes its name from the EU flag, blue with golden stars, would entitle highly qualified third country nationals to a series of rights in any of the EU nations.

INDO-US NUKE DEAL

Indian communists warn govt not to implement accord

AFP, New Delhi

Communist allies of India's ruling Congress party yesterday warned the government not to push ahead with implementing a controversial nuclear deal with the United States.

The pact, concluded in August, has triggered a political storm at home, with both the left and the opposition saying it threatens India's sovereignty and will curb its military capability.

The agreement allows energy-hungry India to buy civilian nuclear technology while possessing nuclear weapons despite not having signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"We are not saying scrap the nuclear deal. What we are telling the government is don't proceed," warned Prakash Karat, the head of the Communist Party of India-Marxist.

"If it does, we won't be there to

help this government conclude the agreement," he said, repeating a threat that his party could withdraw its support for Congress in parliament and bring down the government.

Karat was objecting to scheduled talks next week between India's atomic energy commission chief, Anil Kakodkar, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna.

The discussions will be aimed at going over the India-US deal and paving the way for a special agreement on inspections as a precursor to India being given access to nuclear fuel. New Delhi must conclude an agreement with the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers' Group before it can buy power plants and technology.

The deal, the cornerstone of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's foreign policy, also requires approval by the US Congress before it can be implemented.



PHOTO: AFP

Communist Party of India, CPI (M) General Secretary Prakash Karat (L) and former Indian prime minister VP Singh (R) gesture during a conference on "Indo-US Nuclear Deal- Implications for Democracy and Sovereignty" in New Delhi yesterday.

US points finger at Iran for Iraq base attack

AFP, Baghdad

A US general in Iraq yesterday pointed the finger of blame at Shiite militiamen using what he said was an Iranian-supplied rocket for a fatal attack two days ago on a military base near Baghdad.

Major General Kevin Bergner said the rocket was launched from the Rasheed area of west Baghdad which he said was a stronghold of the Mahdi Army militia of firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The military said one person was killed and 12 injured in an "indirect fire" attack on Tuesday on Camp Victory, a sprawling military base near Baghdad international airport.

Bergner, spokesman for US forces in Iraq, told a press conference the rocket was similar to those supplied in the past by "Iranian sources" to Mahdi Army fighters.

He acknowledged however that there was no direct evidence to prove that Mahdi Army fighters were behind Tuesday's attack nor that the weapon had definitely been supplied by Iranian forces.

"It was consistent with rockets

supplied in the past by Iranian sources to Jaysh al-Mahdi," he said, using the US military's term for the Mahdi Army.

Sadr has called on his militia to halt armed activities for six months, but attacks are continuing.

"We do see some elements obeying Sadr's pledge," said Bergner. "But we also see some members who are disobeying his pledge."

Meanwhile, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday rejected the congressional testimony of the top US officials in Iraq accusing Iran of interfering in its war-torn neighbor.

He also said the Islamic Republic could help in Iraq if the US and British governments stopped alleging it is fighting a proxy war there by arming Shia Muslim militias accused of attacking coalition forces and Sunni Arabs.

In an interview on Iranian state television, Ahmadinejad said Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker raised allegations of Iranian meddling solely because of the political debate within the United States over the war in Iraq.

Democrats assail Bush over troop cut plan

AFP, Washington

Opposition Democrats assailed President George W. Bush's tentative plan to withdraw up to 30,000 US troops from Iraq by next July even before he announced it Thursday.

Bush will make a 15-minute, televised address on Thursday night saying he could bring force levels back to where they were in December 2006 if the conditions are right.

A senior aide said that the president would closely follow the strategy laid out by the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, which would end the military "surge" ordered in January. That would leave roughly 130,000 US troops in Iraq about six months before Bush -- who has cited the half-century US presence in South Korea as a possible model for Iraq -- hands the White House keys to his successor.

With the war-weary US public largely in favour of a withdrawal from the strife-torn country, it was unclear whether Bush's announce-

ment would take some pressure off his Republican allies ahead of the November 2008 elections.

Under heavy fire from Democrats who want a swifter end to the conflict, the White House insisted it saw progress in Iraq on the security and political fronts but flatly refused to even hint at when the conflict would be over.

"You don't know when the war's going to end because you don't know when the war's going to end - you don't have a crystal ball," Bush spokesman Tony Snow told reporters.

Bush's speech is to start at 9:00 pm (Friday 0100 GMT).

A top White House official who asked not to be named said that Bush would say that "all draw-downs will be based on the conditions on the ground" and that the withdrawal, to be completed in July 2008, could start this month.

Democrats were having none of it. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid called the decision not to replace some 30,000 troops when they are rotated out "neither a drawdown nor the change in mis-

sion we need."

"It appears the president is dug in," Reid said, calling Bush's plan "more of the same."

"This is unacceptable to me. It is unacceptable to the American people," said Reid, who vowed to craft legislation this month "that changes the mission in Iraq and begins a true redeployment of our troops."

On the campaign trail, Democratic White House hopeful Barack Obama demanded a withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq by late 2008 -- and used a new war plan as a prism to attack his top rival, fellow Senator Hillary Clinton.

"Unfortunately, conventional thinking in Washington lined up for the war," the senator said in remarks not specifically mentioning Clinton, but targeting the Washington political class of which she is a leading member.

Turning to the Bush administration's strategy, Obama warned "the bar for success is so low that it is almost buried in the sand."