

Hundreds flee as high waves strike Indonesia coast

AFP, Kupang
High waves lashed hundreds of homes in eastern Indonesia Thursday, forcing about 1,000 people to flee but causing no casualties, an official said yesterday.

Some 250 houses along the coastline were hit this morning by three-metre high waves, leaving dozens destroyed, a senior official at Biboki Anleu, in East Nusa Tenggara province, told reporters.

He said that there was no reports of casualties so far but ongoing heavy downpours had hampered his teams' ability to complete site checks.

At least 1,000 residents have fled their homes, he added. High waves have been lashing Indonesia's eastern islands for the past week.

On Tuesday, two students drowned in a resort area south of Kupang, the capital of East Nusa Tenggara, when a three-metre (10-foot) wave swept to shore, their relatives said.

Facebook disables Bilawal profiles

AFP, London
Popular Internet site Facebook on Thursday said two purported profiles of slain Pakistan politician Benazir Bhutto's son Bilawal were not authentic, and that the company had taken them down.

Two officials from Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, which the 19-year-old Bilawal took over on Sunday three days after his mother's assassination, said the profiles were a hoax.

Facebook, a social networking site that claims worldwide membership, did not specify how it had determined the profiles were bogus but said a "range of criteria" are used in making such decisions.

US ties not currently in Iran's interest, says Khamenei

AFP, Tehran
Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday said that Iran has "no benefit" in resuming ties with the United States at the current time, state television reported.

"Cutting ties with the United States is one of our basic policies. We have never said that they will be cut for ever," Khamenei told students in a speech in the central city of Yazd.

"The conditions of the US government are such now that it is harmful for us to resume relations," he added. "Despite some talkative people's claims, it has no benefit for the Iranian nation."

"The day that relations with the United States are beneficial to the Iranian nation, I will be the first one to approve of that."

Eight killed in India police firing

AFP, Guwahati
Eight people were killed and 20 injured when police opened fire on protesters demanding village elections in northeastern India, police said yesterday.

The incident occurred in Assam state when a call for a shutdown turned violent, a police spokesman said.

Protesters were trying to enforce a strike to press for their demand for elections in the area, which is run by an autonomous council of tribal people.

Tribal people fear the loss of their control if elections are held.



Supporters of presidential candidate Raila Odinga march during a demonstration in a street leading out of the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya yesterday. Kenyan police used tear gas, live rounds and water cannon Thursday to disperse protesters marching on Nairobi city centre to attend a banned rally organised by defeated presidential challenger Raila Odinga.

Musharraf must go if Pakistan is to survive

Says think-tank

AFP, Islamabad
President Pervez Musharraf must quit if Pakistan is to regain stability in the wake of the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, a think-tank said Thursday.

Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in 1999, is "no longer, if he ever was, a factor for stability," warned the latest briefing from the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, an independent body that studies global conflict.

"It is time to recognise that democracy, not an artificially propped-up, defrocked, widely

despised general has the best chance to provide stability and turn back extremists' gains," said Robert Templar, ICG's Asia director.

ICG said that in addition to Musharraf's resignation there must be full restoration of Pakistan's constitution and the reappointment of Supreme Court judges he dismissed in November when he imposed emergency rule.

Bhutto, a two-time former prime minister, was assassinated at a campaign rally in Rawalpindi a week ago.

Her death in a gun and suicide bombing and ensuing unrest,

including 58 deaths, prompted planned January 8 polls to be delayed until February 18.

"Bhutto's death has drawn the battle lines even more clearly between Musharraf's military-backed regime and Pakistan's moderate majority, which will settle for nothing less than genuine parliamentary democracy," said Mark Schneider, ICG's senior vice-president.

The ICG agreed with the decision of Pakistan's Election Commission to postpone the parliamentary polls, but only if extra steps are taken to ensure the delay "creates conditions for free and fair elections."

Kenyan police battle protesters

Opposition postpones 'million-man' rally; EU, US want coalition government in Kenya

AFP, Nairobi/Brussels
Kenya's main opposition party postponed a "million-man" rally here yesterday after police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the planned protest against last week's presidential poll results.

The mass rally organised by the Orange Democratic Movement was put off until January 8, senior ODM leader William Ruto told a group of demonstrators in Nairobi.

Defeated presidential challenger Raila Odinga had wanted to use the event to present himself to Kenyans as "the people's president," amid growing evidence that the counting process in the December 27 polls was rigged.

The disputed poll triggered a wave of violence that has killed more than 340 people and displaced tens of thousands, mainly in western regions.

Huge paramilitary police contingents on Thursday fired tear gas and warning shots to foil attempts by ODM supporters, mainly from Nairobi's slums, to march to the rally at Uhuru (independence) Park.

Youths earlier set fire to barricades on one of the capital's main thoroughfares.

A senior police official said there were around 2,000 demonstrators and accused them of criminal intent.

"We have dispersed them

because they were planning to loot Nakumatt (super)market and we will not allow them into the city centre," police commander Herbert Khaemba told AFP.

In the western city of Kisumu, another ODM stronghold, police said they had arrested two opposition lawmakers mobilising youths to stage a banned protest there.

In Nairobi, protesters wearing the ODM's orange colours poured out of Kibera - Africa's largest slum - looking for cracks in the tight security set-up.

"If they block the meeting today, there will be no peace. This is revolution," said Paul Onyango Sati, a 29-year-old unemployed Kibera resident.

Meanwhile, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice agreed Thursday to call for a coalition government in violence-wracked Kenya, a Solana spokeswoman said.

Solana is "deeply concerned at the situation in Kenya" and the discussion with Rice was to take place on Thursday or Friday, spokeswoman Mary Brazier said.

"We will be speaking very soon with Rice, this evening or tomorrow, to discuss the situation there and raise... the possibility of sending a US-EU team there to look at the situation see how it can be improved," Brazier told AFP.

Iowa turnout crucial to success

AP, Des Moines

Presidential hopefuls urged their partisans to brave the cold and rally fellow Iowans to the caucuses Thursday, a massive test of organization that held the key to victory in the first contests of the 2008 election season. Capturing the urgency and biting chill in the air, Barack Obama implored his people, "Walk quick, talk fast."

Iowans, courted for months by candidates barnstorming their towns, swamping their airwaves and, in the later rounds, bickering with each other, finally give shape to the presidential race in a caucus ritual rooted in a centuries-old tradition of political activism.



Pakistani supporters of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) shout slogans during a protest to condemn the assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto in Lahore yesterday. Pakistan's opposition parties demanded better security as the nation prepared for a lengthy February 18 election campaign, a week after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

India asks Myanmar to speed up process of political reforms

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has asked Myanmar to speed up the process of political reforms and national reconciliation, amidst growing international pressure on New Delhi to nudge Yangon to end suppression of pro-democracy activists in that country.

During his meeting with visiting Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win here on Wednesday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed "the need for greater urgency in bringing about political reforms and national reconciliation in Myanmar," said the spokesman of Indian External Affairs Ministry.

This process, he added, "has to be broad-based to include all sections of society including Aung San Suu Kyi, and the various ethnic groups in Myanmar."

Myanmar Foreign Minister also met his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee and conveyed to him the recent initiatives taken by the

government in Myanmar on political reform and national reconciliation process.

Mukherjee reiterated India's support to the efforts by UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari towards ushering democracy in that country.

India has not been favouring stringent sanctions against Myanmar as advocated by European Union or the United States in the wake of the military junta cracking down on pro-democracy movement in that country and its brutal suppression on protests by Buddhist monks and students in September last year.

Indian prime minister expressed satisfaction over growing relations between India and Myanmar.

During the meeting between Nyan Win and Mukherjee, trade and cooperation in energy sector came up for discussion. The trade between the two countries stood at present at one billion dollars.

Indian engineer, 6 Afghan cops killed in suicide attack

AFP, AP, Kandahar/Kabul

An Indian engineer and six Afghan policemen were killed Thursday when a suicide bomber blew himself amid security forces investigating an earlier explosion in western Afghanistan, an official said.

The bombing in the western province of Nimroz was the first suicide bombing this year after nearly 150 of such attacks mostly blamed on Taliban rebels killed hundreds of people -- mainly civilians -- in 2007.

'Musharraf on horns of election dilemma'

AFP, Islamabad

Even if Pakistan had held elections on time instead of delaying them in the wake of the chaos unleashed by Benazir Bhutto's killing, President Pervez Musharraf was set to lose, analysts say.

Had election officials heeded calls by Pakistan's opposition and the world community to proceed with the January 8 polls, Bhutto's party and others could have ridden a wave of grief over her death, they say.

But the postponement of the vote for nearly six weeks until February 18 has put its credibility in doubt, with Musharraf's opponents alleging the move is designed to buy time to rig the electoral process.

Analysts say that key US ally Musharraf was damned if the polls went ahead and his backers lost -- a move that could have left him open to a no-confidence vote in parliament -- and damned if they were held up.

Far from convincing a sceptical public that the security situation needed stabilising after riots that left nearly 60 people dead, the decision has reinforced the perception that the vote could end up a farce, they say.

"The decision to postpone is a sign of weakness and the elections will not be viewed as credible," Najam Sethi, the editor of

Pakistan's Daily Times newspaper, told AFP.

"It was taken in disregard of the opinion of the opposition and was based on the recommendation of bureaucrats who owe their allegiance to the former government," he said.

"It is clear that they had already made up their mind and were just looking for an excuse. He acknowledges the fact that his party has lost -- this is not about law and order."

Musharraf said in a televised address to the nation Wednesday that rioters who caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damage had destroyed voting offices and burned electoral rolls in several areas of the country.

"The postponement was unavoidable and the decision by the election commission is correct," the president said.

The parties of Benazir and ex-premier Nawaz Sharif said they would take part but condemned the delay -- with a Benazir aide saying she was going to reveal evidence of rigging plans involving election officials hours before her death.

Public scepticism over government explanations for Benazir Bhutto's death, coupled with allegations by her supporters of government involvement, meant that Musharraf's justifications were likely to fall on deaf ears, analysts say.



A Palestinian youth throws stones at Israeli troops during a military operation in the Old City of Nablus in West Bank yesterday. About 70 Israeli army jeeps rolled into the West Bank town of Nablus Thursday to arrest wanted militants and were surrounding buildings including the Rafidya hospital in the city centre, a Palestinian official said.

Israeli-Palestinian peace deal in 2008: Bush

8 killed in new Israeli Gaza blitz

AFP, Jerusalem

US President George W Bush believes an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal will be reached this year, according to excerpts of an interview published on Thursday ahead of his visit to the region.

Bush said the two sides must clinch a deal in 2008 in order to see the creation of a Palestinian state, Israel's top-selling Yediot Aharonot newspaper quoted him as saying in the interview which will be published in full on Friday.

The US president is visiting Israel and the Palestinian territories next week in a bid to push to Middle East peace talks which were relaunched at an international conference in Annapolis in November.

In the interview, Bush sought to

ease Israeli fears that any future Palestinian state could threaten its security.

"I will not allow the creation of a terrorist state on Israel's border," he said in a quote translated into Hebrew.

Meanwhile, eight Palestinians, including two women, were killed in Israeli ground and air bombardments in Gaza on Thursday, local medical sources said, in the latest blitz against the Hamas-ruled territory.

Israeli troops and tanks backed by combat helicopters were operating in the village of Bani Suheila near the southern town of Khan Yunis, witnesses and medical sources said.

Eight people, including a mother and daughter and at least three militants, were killed in the

Israeli bombardments, while 30 people were injured and several houses destroyed, the sources said.

Israel has carried out near-daily military strikes and incursions across what it considers a "hostile entity" in a bid to halt militant rocket fire since the Islamist movement Hamas seized power in Gaza in June.

The renewed violence comes shortly before US President George W. Bush is due in the region in a bid to push forward recently revived Middle East peace talks.

In Gaza, brothers Ahmad Fayyad, 20, and 25-year-old Sami Fayyad, both members of the radical Islamic Jihad, were killed in a raid on a house which also killed their mother, Karima, 50, and sister Asmaa, 20, the medical sources said.

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