

Thousands hit by flash floods in Assam

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE,
Guwahati

Flash floods triggered by heavy monsoon rains in Assam have displaced more than 225,000 people, besides destroying a large number mud homes, officials said on Sunday.

The eastern districts of Lakhimpur and Jorhat have been the worst hit, with an estimated 200 villages affected by the third wave of flooding that began Thursday, a government spokesman said.

"The situation is critical with many areas under water and severe erosion caused by the Brahmaputra is compounding the woes," Lakhimpur police chief S.A. Karim told IANS.

A government statement said 175,000 people were displaced in Lakhimpur, about 400 km east of

Assam's main city Guwahati.

A Central Water Commission bulletin said the Brahmaputra and its tributaries were flowing above the danger mark in at least six places. Thousands have been displaced overnight with the Brahmaputra breaching a vital embankment along Majuli, South Asia's largest river island.

A water resources department official said at least a quarter of the 421 sq km island in Jorhat district, 320 km east of Guwahati, was submerged after a breach in a mud embankment.

"Close to 50,000 people have been displaced after floodwaters entered 100 villages in Majuli. The villagers are sheltered in some highlands," a government spokesman said.

"Thousands of people are taking shelter in makeshift camps and on embankments and other

raised platforms. The authorities are providing them food and other essentials," Karim said.

The first two waves of floods in Assam in May and June killed more than 30 people and displaced about 600,000, mostly in Lakhimpur district.

The floodwaters of the Brahmaputra have cut a treacherous swathe across Jorhat and Lakhimpur districts breaching more than a dozen vital embankments, besides sweeping away road bridges and stretches of highways.

The 2,906-km river - one of the longest in Asia - flows through Tibet, India and Bangladesh before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. Every year the monsoon causes the river to flood in Assam, a state of 26 million. In 2004, at least 200 people died and millions were displaced.

'US sanctions to stifle Zimbabwe reforms'

AFP, Harare

The latest US sanctions against President Robert Mugabe's regime are designed to stifle economic recovery in Zimbabwe, his chief spokesman was quoted Sunday as saying.

Secretary for Information George Charamba told the state-run Sunday Mail that the sanctions aimed at impeding Zimbabwean companies from finding partners in China, Iran and other eastern countries.

The US government last week expanded its sanctions regime by adding to it the names of several dozen individuals as well as 17 companies and parastatals linked to the Mugabe regime.

Since the imposition of targeted sanctions after disputed 2002 elections, some Western firms have shied away from doing business in Zimbabwe -- prompting Harare to adopt a "Look East" policy for trade and investment deals.

Zimbabwe, currently gripped by a post-election crisis, has been ravaged by a record hyperinflation, which shot up from 165,000 per-

cent in February to 2.2 million percent in June.

"The companies slapped with sanctions are those companies that are trying to validate the 'Look East' policy by entering into partnership with non-traditional investors," Charamba said.

"Western interests are now threatened by these non-traditional investors from China, Iran and other Asian countries," he added.

The US Treasury Department said the sanctions would be imposed on 17 companies or entities as well as on an Omani national.

It said Mugabe, 84, his senior officials and regime's cronies "have used these entities to illegally siphon revenue and foreign exchange from the Zimbabwean people".

Among the targeted entities are Operation Sovereign Legitimacy, described as the commercial arm of the Zimbabwean armed forces, and the Minerals Marketing Corporation of Zimbabwe, a marketing and export agent for all minerals except gold and silver mined in the country.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese soldiers patrol the streets in Bab al-Tebbaneh neighbourhood following clashes between the rival Sunni Muslim and the Alawite communities in the northern Mediterranean city of Tripoli yesterday. The Lebanese army has restored calm in the northern port city of Tripoli after deadly clashes sent 2,000 families fleeing to safer areas, a security official said Sunday.

13 Tigers killed in fresh Lanka battle

AFP, Colombo

At least 13 Tamil Tiger rebels have been killed by security forces in fresh clashes in northern Sri Lanka, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Soldiers killed the guerrillas in the Wannu region on Saturday, the scene of weeks of heavy fighting, the ministry said. There were no reports of government casualties.

The ministry said 19 bodies of Tiger rebels killed by security forces on Friday were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross in the north of the island Sunday to be returned to the guerrillas.

The figures bring to 5,314 the number of rebels the military says it has killed since the start of the year, when the government pulled

out of a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire.

Just 464 government soldiers have died in the same period, according to ministry figures.

Casualty claims cannot be verified independently because the ministry bars journalists from visiting frontlines.

Colombo appears to be pressing ahead with its military offensive in the north despite the guerrillas' offer of a 10-day unilateral ceasefire ahead of a South Asian meeting that started here on Sunday.

Sri Lanka is hosting a meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which brings over 1,000 delegates from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, as well as Sri Lanka.

Raul fails to announce reforms in Cuba

AP, Santiago

President Raul Castro warned Washington that Cuba would keep its defences up no matter who wins November's US presidential election, but failed to announce any new changes to the communist system during a speech Saturday.

In a 48-minute Revolution Day address, Castro also told Cubans to prepare for tough times ahead as rising oil and commodity prices take a toll on the island's economy.

Amid anticipation that he would use the speech to unveil fresh reforms, Castro instead focused on the past as he spoke to thousands of supporters in front of the Moncada military complex, where a band of rebels led by he and his brother Fidel launched an attack 55 years ago, planting the

seeds for the 1959 Cuban revolution.

"When we attacked the Moncada, none of us dreamed of being here today," Castro said in Santiago, 535 miles southeast of Havana, the de-facto capital of the island's eastern half.

He warned of more economic austerity for the already poor island and commanded Communist Party leaders to fulfil the promises they make to the Cuban people.

"Regardless of our great wishes to solve every problem, we cannot spend in excess of what we have," Castro said.

And he vowed that Cuba would remain prepared for any potential US attack regardless of who wins the US presidential vote, which pits Barack Obama against Sen. John McCain.

Iran hangs 29 people

AP, Tehran

Iran hanged 29 people at dawn on Sunday after they had been convicted of murder, drug trafficking and other crimes, state run television reported.

All were hanged inside Evin prison, north of the capital. The hangings were carried out after the death sentences were ratified by Iran's Supreme Court, the television report said.

A separate report on the television station's web site quoted Tehran Chief Prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi as saying the men had records of repeated crimes, including rape, armed robbery and murder. The web site also said some of the convicts had "smuggled thousands of kilograms of various kinds of narcotics" in and out of Iran.

No 'blank check' for Iraq war: Democrats

AP, Washington

Sen Jack Reed says America can't afford the Republican strategy of continuing to write blank checks for the Iraq war.

"At a time when the war in Iraq costs \$10 billion each month, Americans are paying \$4 a gallon for gasoline, and our economy is struggling, we cannot continue down the path that President Bush and Senator McCain propose: writing blank check after blank check," Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, said Saturday in his party's weekly radio address.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians inspect the destroyed house of Hamas member Shihab al-Natche, 25, following an Israeli army operation in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron yesterday. Israeli troops killed al-Natche Sunday in an exchange of fire, an army spokesman said.

Hamas presses on with security crackdown

Clashes in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Clashes broke out in Gaza City on Sunday, wounding at least six people, as Hamas-run security forces pressed on with a territory-wide crackdown on rival Palestinian factions after a deadly bombing.

The fighting erupted when Hamas-run police moved to arrest members of the Army of Islam, a small shadowy militant group believed to have links to al-Qaeda.

"Hamas forces came to arrest us early this morning, just after midnight," one member of the group who asked not to be named told reporters.

"There was fighting for several hours, with rocket-propelled grenades, explosions and gunfire, but they did not arrest anyone."

At least six people were wounded in the clashes, said a medic at Gaza's main Al-Shifa hospital who also asked not to be identified.

The clashes came as Hamas cracked down on rival movements it suspected of planting a bomb on Friday night that killed five senior militants and a five-year-old girl in the deadliest Palestinian attack on the group since it seized power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007.

Hamas on Saturday blamed the attack at a Gaza City beach club

popular with its members on Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party, which it accused of trying to undermine its rule.

Meanwhile Israeli forces killed a Hamas operative in an early morning gunfight in the southern West Bank city of Hebron, according to Palestinian security officials who said another three people were arrested in the raid.

Hamas's armed wing vowed to take revenge for the killing of Shihab al-Natche, who Israeli media reported was behind a suicide bombing in February that killed an Israeli woman and wounded 11 other people.

Ruling party claims victory in Cambodia polls

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling party on Sunday claimed victory in polls overshadowed by a military standoff with Thailand, setting the stage for him to extend his 23-year grip on power.

"We won the election," party spokesman Khieu Kanharith told AFP, citing tallies by their supporters. "We are leading in most of the provinces."

He added that the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) was not yet sure of its margin of victory, as ballots were still being counted.

The initial vote count showed the CPP was leading with more than two-thirds of the vote in three provinces, election officials said on national television. Final official results were not expected until next month.

Hun Sen had been widely tipped to win due to a booming economy that has helped improve the quality of life in one of the world's poorest nations, and due to nationalist sentiment sparked by the border feud with Thailand, analysts said.

Khieu Kanharith had earlier predicted the party would win 80 of the 123 seats in parliament, just shy of a two-thirds majority, as the party siphoned away votes from the opposition Sam Rainsy Party and royalist FUNCINPEC.

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy called for a re-vote in Phnom Penh, alleging 200,000 people there could not vote Sunday after their names were lost from registration lists.

"Neither party won more than two-thirds of the seats," he told reporters, estimating that no party had received more than 70 seats, according to a tally by his supporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Cambodian election officials count ballots at a polling station in Phnom Penh yesterday.

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* Incomplete applications will not be accepted.

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Youssef Chahine

Legendary Egyptian film-maker Chahine dies

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian film-maker Youssef Chahine, Arab cinema's most celebrated director, died on Sunday aged 82 after several weeks in a coma, his friend and fellow director Khaled Youssef said.

"Youssef Chahine died this morning at 3:30," said Youssef, who co-directed Chahine's latest film "Chaos" in 2007.

A funeral ceremony will be held in Cairo on Monday, Youssef said, before Chahine is buried in the family crypt in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria where he was born, Egypt's official MENA news agency said.

"He was one of the most important film-makers in the world, not just in the Arab world," renowned Egyptian actor Nur al-Sherif told AFP after the death was announced, paying tribute to Chahine's "different" style of cinema.

Chahine was flown back to Cairo on July 17 after a month-long stay in Paris where he underwent surgery after suffering a brain haemorrhage and falling into a coma. He was being cared for at the Maadi Military hospital in south Cairo.

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