Mudslide buries hundreds in Taiwan mountain village

28 killed as typhoons hit East Asia

AP, AFP, *Taipei*

A typhoon-spawned mudslide engulfed a mountain village in southern Taiwan, burying schools and homes and hundreds of people under debris, a police official said yesterday.

At least 28 people were known to have died and scores more were reported missing Monday after typhoons battered East Asia, as parts of the region experienced their worst weather in half a century.

Half of those killed were in Taiwan when Typhoon Morakot slammed into the island, dumping a record 2.5 metres (100 inches) of rain at the weekend.

The storm hit mainland China on Sunday afternoon, where it claimed another life as authorities ordered nearly a million people to evacuate costal areas.

In Japan, 13 people died in floods and landslides caused by torrential rain as Typhoon Etau bore down on the archipelago, forcing thousands into emergency shelters and disrupting travel networks.

Rescuers in Taiwan were battling to reach hundreds cut off by Morakot as widespread floods and mudslides knocked out railway and road traffic, cut power and water supplies and brought down bridges.

Typhoon Morakot dumped up to 80 inches (two meters) of rain on some communities over the weekend before moving on to China, where it forced the evacuation of nearly 1 million people along the east coast. Earlier it had struck the Philippines, leaving at least 22 dead.

It has now been downgraded to a tropical storm.

Speaking to The Associated Press, a Taiwanese police official who identified himself by his surname, Wang, said about 100 people have been rescued by military helicopter or avoided Sunday morning's mudslide in Shiao Lin village.

One of the rescued villagers, Lin Chien-chung, told the United Evening News that he believes as many as 600 people were still buried by the mud.

"The mudslide covered a large part of the village, including a primary school and many homes," he was quoted as saying. "A part of the mountain above us just fell on the village."

He did not explain the apparent discrepancy between his estimate of deaths and the policeman's smaller estimate of people still missing.

The village was still cut off from the outside world Monday evening, after flood waters destroyed a bridge about 12km away. Military helicopters have dropped provisions in the area and rescued survivors.

Taiwan's official death toll from Morakot stands at 14. Another 51, not including the people in Shiao Lin, are listed as missing.

Morakot, meaning emerald in Thai, slammed into China's Fujian province Sunday afternoon carrying heavy rain and winds of 119km per hour, according to the China Meteorological Administration. At least one child died after a house collapsed in Zhejiang province.

PHOTO: AFP

A collapsed apartment block lies on a riverbed in Taimali, in southeast Taiwan's Taitung county yesterday. At least 28 people were known to have died and scores more were reported missing after typhoons battered East Asia as parts of the region experienced their worst weather in half a century.

PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi soldier stands at the site of two truck bombs in the village of Khaznah, east of Mosul in northern Iraq yesterday. The booby-trapped lorries exploded before dawn leaving 47 people dead and 138 wounded.

Iran opposition claims jailed protesters raped

AFP, *Tehran*

An Iranian opposition leader has claimed that women and boys detained over the wave of unrest that swept the nation after the disputed presidential election have been brutally raped in custody.

The allegations by defeated presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi surfaced as Iran hit back at Western criticism of its mass trials of protesters, including British and French embassy staff.

"A number of detainees have said that some female detainees have been raped savagely. Young boys held in detention have also been savagely raped," Karroubi said in a letter to powerful cleric and ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

"The young boys are suffering from depression and serious physical and mental damage since their rapes," he said, urging a probe into the claims.

Karroubi made the allegations in a "confidential letter" delivered on July 29 to Rafsanjani in his capacity as head of the Assembly of Experts, the powerful body, which selects the supreme leader and supervises his activities.

Karroubi, a reformist former parliamentary speaker who came a distant fourth in the June 12 election that returned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power, has previously alleged that protesters were being abused and beaten in custody.

About 2,000 opposition supporters were arrested in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's disputed victory. Most have been released, but around 200 remain behind bars. At least 110 have also been put on trial.

ME peace unlikely in coming years: Israel

Fatah elects new leaders to end internal strife

AFP, *Jerusalem*

Improving security and the Palestinian economy is the most Middle East peace talks can achieve in the coming years, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said on Monday, warning against any attempt to impose a deal.

"The Palestinians' radical and uncompromising positions on Jerusalem, the right of return and the settlement blocs create an unbridgeable gap between us and them," Lieberman told a delegation of US Democratic lawmakers.

"Therefore, Israeli policy must be based on reality and not illusion while maintaining the dialogue between us and the Palestinians, improving security arrangements and the economic condition of the Palestinians."

"This is the maximum we can reach in the coming years," Lieberman's office quoted the ultra-nationalist minister as saying.

US President Barack Obama has vowed to work vigorously to end the decades-old conflict and his administration is attempting to put the faltering Middle East peace talks back on track following their suspension in December.

The United States is also putting heavy pressure on hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to freeze settlement construction in the occupied West Bank, a key Palestinian demand for talks to resume.

But Lieberman warned against any attempt to impose a peace deal.

"Any other extravagant goal such as imposing an agreement that is limited in time, would again end in failure, disappointment and even confrontation," he told the US delegation.

Meanwhile, Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas's Fatah faction elected new leaders for the first time in 20 years yesterday, hoping they can invigorate a party weakened by internal rifts and its rout from the Gaza Strip by its Hamas rivals.

Vote counting started early Monday after about 2,000 delegates cast their ballots at a party congress in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem, the first ever in Palestinian territory.

Flying frog among 353 new Himalayan species

AFP, *Kathmandu*

A flying frog, the world's smallest deer and the first new monkey to be found in over a century are among 350 new species discovered in the eastern Himalayas in the past decade, the WWF said Monday.

But the environmental group said the vital habitats of the mountain range were facing growing pressures from unsustainable development in the region, which spans Nepal, China, India, Bhutan and Myanmar.

In a report released here, it said climate change, deforestation, overgrazing by domestic livestock and illegal poaching and wildlife trading threatened one of the biologically richest areas of the planet.

"In the last half-century, this area of South Asia has faced a wave of pressures as a result of population growth and the increasing demand for commodities," said the report, "The Eastern Himalayas -- Where Worlds Collide."

"Only 25 percent of the original habitats in the region remain intact. For the unique species of the Eastern Himalayas, this means that today 163 are considered globally threatened," it said.

The WWF said 353 new species were discovered in the region between 1998 and 2008, among them a red-footed tree frog known as a "flying frog" because its large webbed feet allow it to glide when falling.

Another new species was a kind of caecilian, a limbless amphibian that resembles a giant earthworm and lives underground -- a significant discovery because caecilians are among the planet's least-studied creatures.

Other highlights were the world's smallest deer -- a miniature muntjac standing just 60-80 centimetres (25-30 inches) tall that was found in northern Myanmar -- and the first new monkey species to be discovered in over a century.

The WWF said the new species of macaque was one of the highest-dwelling monkeys in the world, living in India's Arunachal Pradesh state at between 1,600 and 3,500 metres (5,000 and 11,500 feet) above sea

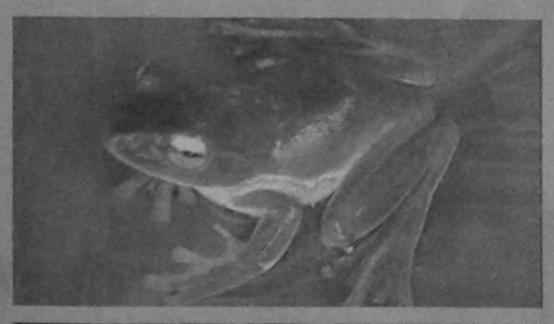

PHOTO: AFP

Handout photograph from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) shows a Flying Frog (Rhacophorus Suffry) and Leaf Deer (Muntiacus Putaoensis) in the eastern Himalayas. The flying frog, world's smallest deer and the first new monkey to be found in over a century are among 350 new species discovered in the eastern Himalayas in the past decade, the WWF said Monday.

Chavez asks military to get ready for war

AP, *Caracas*

President Hugo Chavez told his military to be prepared for a possible confrontation with Colombia, warning that Bogota's plans to increase the US military presence at its bases poses a threat to Venezuela.

Chavez has issued near daily warnings that Washington could use bases in Colombia to destabilise the region since learning of negotiations to lease seven Colombian military bases to the United States.

"The threat against us is growing," Chavez said Sunday. "I call on the people and the armed forces, let's go, ready for combat!"

Nepal appoints new army chief

AFP, *Kathmandu*

Nepal's government appointed a new acting army chief after controversial army general Rukmangad Katawal formally retired from his post, officials said Sunday.

Katawal, whose three-year tenure expires on September 9, was at the centre of a controversy that led to the fall of the Maoist-led government.

Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal -- who goes by the name Prachanda -- resigned as prime minister in May after just eight months when the president overruled his decision to sack Katawal.

Bomb threat made against Afghan plane

AFP, *Beijing*

A plane flying from Afghanistan to Urumqi, the capital of China's troubled Xinjiang region, reported a bomb threat but was refused permission to land, the official Chinese news agency said Monday.

Xinhua news agency, citing police sources, said security and emergency teams had gone to the airport in Urumqi with checkpoints set up on approach roads.

It said the sources had earlier told it that the plane had been hijacked.