



Rescue team looks for quake victims at Lubuk Laweh village in Pariaman, West Sumatra, yesterday after an earthquake toppled buildings and triggered landslides burying several villages in the area on September 30.

PHOTO: AFP

Indonesia calls off quake search

AP, Padang

Rescue workers called off the search yesterday for life under the rubble left by a massive earthquake, focusing instead on bringing aid to survivors in the towns and hills of western Indonesia, despite being hampered by torrential rains.

"After all this time I consider, from various experiences, it will be difficult to find more people alive," Ignacio Leon, the head of the UN's humanitarian agency in Indonesia, told The Associated Press.

"I don't want to cut the hope of the people, but the focus will shift and we are supporting the government now more in the relief side," he said.

The death toll from Wednesday's tremor in Sumatra Island is expected to be in the thousands once the missing people are declared dead. The UN has said 1,100 people died, while the government puts the toll at 603.

Leon would not categorically say the search and rescue operation was called off, but other teams confirmed that was

the case.

Hiroaki Sano, head of the Japan Disaster Rescue Team, told the AP that officials of the UN and the Indonesian government discussed international assistance and "agreed no further assistance is needed for search and rescues."

"We got here quickly but we haven't found any survivors. The first 100 hours are crucial," he said.

International search and rescue teams were winding up operations and preparing to go back home as there was little hope of finding any survivors, he said.

"They believe we should switch from emergency searches to the rebuilding stage," Sano said. International aid teams will continue to provide food and other humanitarian assistance, he said.

Government minister Aburizal Bakrie told reporters that \$600 million was needed to repair homes, schools, mosques, roads and other basic infrastructure damaged by the magnitude 7.6 earthquake.

It had initially said \$400 million was needed, but raised the estimate after the

scale of the disaster became clear.

The undersea quake devastated 10 districts in the Western Sumatra province including the capital, Padang, a city of 900,000 people where scores of tall buildings, including hotels, a mall, mosques and schools came down crashing. In addition, the quake triggered huge landslides in the hills of Pariaman district where entire villages were wiped out.

Little aid has reached the remote communities as many roads and bridges were destroyed. Landslides also blocked many of the roads leading to villages and an AP crew saw aid workers scrambling to clear the road of dirt, boulders and trees.

One road ended at Kampung Dalam village. The rest of the way had caved in, forcing rescue teams from South Korea, France and Germany to camp there. Villages further up the road were now accessible only by foot.

Heavy rain since Sunday night threatened to trigger more landslides and hamper delivery of aid as most aid teams were forced to stay put in Padang.

Sample audit in Afghan vote gets under way

AFP, Kabul

Afghan authorities began a sample audit of suspect ballots in the controversial elections yesterday, officials said, as the country inches closer to a final decision on the next president.

Afghans went to the polls on August 20 to elect their president for the next five years, but allegations of widespread fraud -- mainly directed against the incumbent Hamid Karzai -- have delayed the announcement of a winner.

Karzai leads the preliminary results with around 55 percent of the vote. He needs 50 percent plus one vote to be declared the winner.

His main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, has around 28 percent, and has been at the forefront of vote-rigging accusations against Karzai.

Pivotal to the final outcome is the result of the audit of 3,498 ballot boxes -- up from an original 3,063, an official said -- that have been returned to Kabul from polling stations across the country for checking.

Ten percent of ballots in those boxes are being examined by Independent Election Commission (IEC) auditors, said the official close to the project, who spoke on condition of anonymity. Results would be extrapolated from the sample.

Auditing was supposed to have begun on Saturday but was delayed, partly due to political wrangling between the two electoral oversight bodies and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), a source at the IEC said.

Nobel Medicine Prize for 'cellular immortality'

AFP, Stockholm

Australian-American researcher Elizabeth Blackburn and Carol Greider and Jack Szostak of the United States won the Nobel Medicine Prize yesterday for identifying a key molecular switch in cellular ageing.

The trio were honoured for the discovery of how chromosomes are protected by telomeres and the role of an enzyme called telomerase in maintaining or stripping away this vital shield.

"The award of the Nobel Prize recognises the discovery of a fundamental mechanism in the cell, a discovery that has stimulated the development of new therapeutic strategies," the Nobel jury said.

The three told Swedish Radio they were overjoyed by the news.

Greider said she was "just thrilled, I just think that the recognition for curiosity-driven basic science is very, very nice," adding

that she was up doing laundry in the US when the early morning call came from Sweden.

Blackburn said she knew when they made their discovery that they were on to something big.

"I felt very excited ... and I thought this is very interesting, this is a very important result, and you don't often feel that about a result," she said.

Szostak said meanwhile he expected "to have a big party at some point" to celebrate the prestigious award.

Telomeres are a minute yet vital factor in ageing. They are like a nubby, protective cap, fitting on the ends of the strands of DNA -- the chemical recipe for life -- that are packed into chromosomes.

Blackburn and Szostak discovered in 1982 that a unique DNA sequence in the telomeres protects the chromosomes from degradation when the cells divide. With Greider, Blackburn also identified

telomerase, the enzyme that makes the telomere DNA.

If telomeres become worn, cells age.

But if telomerase levels are high, the telomere length is maintained, and cellular ageing is braked. A small number of rare but very destructive diseases, including a form of severe anaemia, are linked to defective telomerase, resulting in damaged cells.

Yet there is also a darker and more complex side to this picture.

Many experts initially speculated that ageing could be pinned to telomere shortening, but the process has emerged as something that encompasses different factors, as well as telomeres.

In addition, high telomerase also helps cancer, enabling its cells to replicate endlessly and achieve what scientists call "cellular immortality."

Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2009



PHOTO: AFP

A picture taken from a screen as the Nobel Assembly at Karolinska Institute announces Elisabeth H Blackburn, Carol W Greider and Jack W Szostak as the winners of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Medicine yesterday in Stockholm for discovering an enzyme which helps chromosomes in cells stay eternally young, the Nobel jury said.

Bill for lifelong SSF security placed in JS

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Definition of Bangabandhu's family members however has been widened in the new bill.

Along with Hasina and Rehana, daughters of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, their children too will now be entitled to lifelong security by Special Security Force (SSF).

In the previous law, family members meant only the sisters who survived the August 15 bloodbath that saw the father of the nation and most of his family killed in 1975.

The bill was sent to the parliamentary standing committee on the home ministry for scrutiny.

It says the recipients will get SSF security no matter where they live. It however does not say how the arrangements will be made in that case.

Currently, Hasina's son lives in the United States and daughter in Canada, and Rehana's two daughters and son are settled in the UK.

"The government will provide the father of the nation's family members with lifelong security as prescribed for very important persons in the Special Security Force Ordinance 1986," a provision of the bill reads.

In the SSF ordinance, very important persons (VIP) means a head of state or government of a foreign country and any other person declared VIP by the government.

SSF's principal duty is to ensure security for the president and the prime minister wherever they may be.

As per the provision of the SSF ordinance, the force may seek assistance from the law enforcement and intelligence

agencies, Bangladesh Rifles and the armed forces.

The previous law on safety of Bangabandhu's family caused uproar for allotting Ganabhaban, official residence of the prime minister, to Hasina and a Dhamondihouse to her sister.

About the rationale for enacting fresh law, the home minister cited conspiracies to kill Hasina and others of Bangabandhu family.

Hasina, also Awami League president, has seen several attempts on her life over the years.

A cabinet meeting chaired by her on July 6 okayed the bill.

The proposed law comes within six months into the government's decision to cancel the allotment of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's cantonment residence.

Burglars showed

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143 tolas of gold in total and Tk 2.5 lakh and arrested seven people in this connection from the capital and Sharankhola in Bagerhat twelve days after the sensational burglary.

Zakir Hossain, 40, and Mohammad Shahid, 30, were arrested from Senpara in Mirpur and Jahangir, 39, and Shah Alam, 40, from Jatrabari early Sunday while Fazlu with his wife Minara Begum and Biswajit from Sharankhola in Bagerhat yesterday.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner AKM Shahidul Haque said, "Zakir, Shahid, Jahangir and Shah Alam took part in the incident, Biswajit brought a portion of the stolen gold, and Fazlu and his wife, parents of a burglar, kept 18.5 tolas of

stolen gold in their possession.

The rest of six burglars, at large, were identified but police are not disclosing the names for further investigation and their arrest, he added.

Police recovered 112.5 tolas of gold along with Tk 2.5 lakh from Biswajit, a jewellery shop owner in Sharankhola, and 12 tolas from Jahangir and Shah Alam.

Leader of the gang, Zakir, confessed in preliminary interrogation that he and his nine accomplices had stolen 543 tolas of gold worth around Tk 1.43 crore, Shahidul told The Daily Star.

Owner of Nur Jewellers, Nazir Ahmed Bhuyan, however, mentioned in the statement of the case filed with Mohammadpur Police

Station that around 1586 tolas of gold has been stolen.

Zakir said, "On Eid day we broke into the shop around 9:00am keeping in mind that it would be easy to elude people's eyes as they were busy celebrating the festival."

The burglary went for five hours and after that the gang reached Malibagh where they checked in Sun Rise Residential Hotel for a few hours to divide the gold among them, he added. They sold 214 tolas of gold at Tk 16 lakh to Biswajit but he paid only Tk 5 lakh.

The burglars broke the partition wall between the shop and the restaurant on September 21.

Earlier police arrested the owner of the restaurant and two security guards in this connection.

Playgrounds, water reservoirs

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nation-building activities through temporary employment.

Under the initiative, young men and women aged between 18 and 35 years and having educational qualification of higher secondary or equivalent will be given training on 13 specific categories and be paid Tk 100 a day.

"A three-month pilot project will soon be launched in Kurigram and Barguna," said Azad, adding that after the pilot project the government will continue a project for two years where the youths will be given Tk 200 a day.

If the project is successful, he continued, then the government will introduce the initiative across the country to involve the unemployed youths in nation-building activities. He said the finance ministry has already allocated Tk 20 crore.

"Speaking about the matter,

the prime minister said that her government would implement all the pledges announced in the party's election manifesto one after another," the press secretary adds.

PILGRIMS

The prime minister also directed the religious affairs ministry to take all necessary steps so that the 58,459 pilgrims face no hassles during hajj. She also asked the ministry to raise the number of officials involved in managing the hajj pilgrims to 35 from 20.

"No harassment and suffering of the pilgrims will be tolerated," she told the meeting, adding that she wants to see that the whole process is conducted fairly and properly.

Azad said decision to increase the number of officials was made as the existing manpower is inadequate to deal with the hajj-related issues properly. The number of pilgrims was 48,800 last year.

Meanwhile, the government is yet to sign an agreement on renting houses for pilgrims. The deadline for this expired on September 20. With time running out fast, the religion affairs secretary rushed to Saudi Arabia to rent houses.

The hajj flights this year are scheduled to begin on October 21. However, the Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry is yet to finalise all the flights to carry the pilgrims to and from Saudi Arabia.

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

Yesterday's cabinet also approved amendment to the Public Procurement Act, 2006 with a provision that no experience would be required to bid for tender works worth a maximum of Tk 2 crore.

As per the amendment, the bidders will be allowed to quote only 5 percent less than of the total project cost. "If any bidder quotes more than five percent less, the bidder will be considered disqualified for the task," said the Press Secretary.

The provision was made as many bidders quoted much less amount in their desperate effort to get contracts but ended up doing below standard work.

The cabinet also approved amendment to the Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB), re-naming it Dhaka Mass Transit Authority (DMTA) to be headed by the communications minister. Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation, who headed the DTCB, will be the vice-chairman of the newly formed 20-member authority.

Communications secretary will be the member-secretary while municipality mayors in greater Dhaka will be the members.

The prime minister also instructed the Health and Family Welfare Ministry to send an emergency relief team to the Indonesian earthquake hit area.

NEWS IN BRIEF

2 Isaf soldiers killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Two soldiers with the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) were killed in southern Afghanistan, Nato said Monday, a day after announcing the deaths of eight US soldiers in the east.

One International Security Assistance Force service member died of wounds sustained in an insurgent attack in southern Afghanistan October 4. The service member was from the US," Nato said in a statement.

BSF arrests 5 Pak nationals

PTI, Ahmedabad

Five Pakistani nationals have been arrested from creek area on west coast of Kutch district by the Border Security Force (BSF), police said today. The incident took place yesterday, they said, adding the boat in which they were travelling has also been seized.

According to police, the boat carrying the five persons onboard had ventured into the creek area following which they were arrested by the BSF. They are being brought to joint interrogation centre in Bhuj for questioning, they added.

Justice meted out in vigilante style

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leave the matter to the local leaders, who promised to "give exemplary punishment to the criminals".

They said the victim's family identified at least four of the alleged rapists and the arbitrators are all active members of the ruling Awami League.

"It was a matter of image for the ruling party men during the puja when a top leader was present in Kalapara. And the way the victim's poor family was compensated and the rapists beaten up, the villagers and the victim's family accepted the arbitration as justice done," says an AL senior activist on condition of anonymity.

At around 6:00pm on Sunday the victim, her mother and younger brother were heading for an unknown destination in Kalapara. The mother said she was worried about future of her daughter.

"You see nothing happened to my daughter that day. People are fabricating tales about her," she said clutching her daughter by one hand.

On September 27 the 16 alleged rapists and their accomplices were summoned to a local high school along with their parents. The arbitrators included Kalapara AL

General Secretary Rakibul Ahsan, Municipality Vice-Chairman Sultan Mahmud and local Press Club President and also President of Kalapara AL Bipul Howader.

During the process of this rough justice each of the 'self-confessed rapists' was fined Tk 10,000. As soon as the money amounting to Tk 160,000 was realised, the parents of the young men were asked to leave the school premises.

The AL activists then locked up the main gate of the playground and beat up the criminals one by one.

According to witnesses, the beating of the alleged rapists was brutal and each had to be admitted to hospital. Several of them had to be sent to Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital for further treatment.

The victim's poor family was handed over the money realised from the perpetrators and asked to totally avoid talking to journalists.

According to a close family member, the events of September 25 have traumatised the entire family, which is now living under stress trying to make up alibis for what had happened that night to this juvenile girl.

The victim was forced to

refute allegations of abduction and rape at a hurriedly called press conference.

The same family source, on strict condition of anonymity, said the victim gave a statement to the police naming some of the rapists after she was rescued two kilometres off from the place of abduction at 2:30 in the early morning of September 26.

"She was shattered and cried loudly as her mother tried to console her. Nobody in this area has ever witnessed such a case of abduction and rape so nobody knew what to do," he added.

A local activist of AL said when some people in the crowd at the Kalapara police station demanded the girl to be sent for medical examination, the officer-in-charge (OC) told everyone to go home.

"At around 3:30am the police station was thronged by several hundred people when the OC told everyone to go home. He took the child in custody with her mother beside her for the rest of the night," he said.

The next day the victim's grandfather took the child into his custody after signing an undertaking. The same day the ruling party local leadership also announced

that a salish (arbitration) to try the rapists would be conducted the following day.

The OC of Kalapara later admitted that the police had detained two young men from the place where the girl was dumped but had to release them after the victim failed to identify them as perpetrators.

At around 8:30pm on September 25 the schoolgirl was abducted by a gang of youths from the Yatim Khana Road as she was returning home with her cousin brother after visiting a puja mandap.

During the abduction in front of the residence of a former MP of Jatiya Party, according to half a dozen women in the neighbourhood, there was a commotion as both the girl and her cousin cried for help.

"We could not go out because this part of the road was so dark, but minutes later a young man rushed to inform others nearby about the abduction," said an eyewitness on Yatim Khana Road.

A close relative of the victim said when the alarm was raised about the abduction the entire town became vigilant with scores of men on motorbikes and rickshaws trying to locate the victim and

the abductors.

"People all over Kalapara learned about the abduction within minutes but nobody could trace the victim," he said.

The family source said at around 2:30 in the morning three villagers found the victim near the under-construction Denmark-Bangladesh friendship bridge and informed the police over phone.

A patrol team immediately rescued the girl and brought her to the police station.

"She was so traumatised that she could not say much other than how many people raped her," said the relative.

Nikhil Halder, ward councillor of Chinguria and also organiser of the puja mandap, said the abduction took place on a dark road near the mandap, which is on the border of his ward. "We rushed to the spot immediately after the girl was taken away but could not do anything about it," he said.

Emran Biswas, councillor of the Yatim Khana ward, said the abduction took place within the boundary of his ward.

"I learned that the gang involved in the abduction came from Naiyapara. I was never called by the arbitrators," he said.