



Passengers rest on a bench as all flights were cancelled at the International airport in Warsaw yesterday. Poland mourns for 96 people who died in an air crash on April 10. Late Polish President Lech Kaczynski, his wife Maria and many of the country's military and state elite perished in thick fog when their aircraft attempted to land in Russia. World leaders, including US President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev, are to travel from far and wide to pay last respects to Polish president Lech Kaczynski at his funeral on April 18.

PHOTO: AFP

VOLCANIC ERUPTION

European flights could be stalled till Saturday

17,000 flights to be cancelled

BBC ONLINE

Flights across much of Europe will be severely disrupted well into Saturday because of drifting ash ejected from a volcano in Iceland, officials said.

Much of the airspace across northern and western Europe has been closed, and air control officials said some 17,000 flights would be cancelled yesterday.

Hundreds of thousands of passengers in Europe and around the world have been affected.

Scientists say the volcano is still erupting but producing less ash.

Europe's intergovernmental air control agency, Eurocontrol, said it "expects around 11,000 flights to take place today in European airspace. On a normal day, we would expect 28,000."

Of about 300 transatlantic flights that would usually arrive in Europe in the morning, no more than 120 made it over, the agency said.

"Forecasts suggest that the cloud of volcanic ash is continuing to move east and south-east and that the impact will continue for at least the

next 24 hours," it said in a statement.

More countries moved to close their airspace on Friday morning, joining eight which banned flights on Thursday.

Britain's air traffic control body extended its unprecedented restrictions on UK airspace until at least 0100 BST (1200 GMT) on Saturday.

Exceptions allowed for Northern Ireland and western Scotland saw the first flight leave UK airspace since the ban was imposed, an Air Transat plane bound for Toronto from Glasgow.

"In general, the situation is dynamic and subject to change," said a statement issued by the National Air Traffic Service on Friday morning.

The UK, Irish Republic, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Belgium and the Netherlands closed their airspace on Thursday.

France shut down 24 airports in the north of the country, including the main hub of Paris-Charles de Gaulle, while Germany had closed most of its airports by Friday morning.

At Frankfurt's airport, camp beds were laid out for tired travellers waiting for flights to resume.

The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia also closed their airspace.

4-nation summit vows Iran sanctions

AFP, Brasilia

Brazil, Russia, India and China wrapped up their second-ever Brics summit here after sharpening their call for reforms of international institutions and discussing a push to impose more UN sanctions on Iran.

The gathering of the world's top emerging economies Thursday was truncated and brought forward one day to ensure the participation of Chinese President Hu Jintao, who announced he had to race home to oversee the response to the quake.

"Brazil, Russia, India and China have a fundamental role in the construction of a fairer international order," the summit's host, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, told a closing media conference.

Lula, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh all extended their sympathies to Hu and the Chinese people after an earthquake struck north-western China Wednesday, killing 760 people.

The Chinese president, who flew back to Beijing after the summit to handle what he called "a huge calamity," thanked the leaders for their "solidarity and sympathy."

Singh called the summit "very successful" and described the Brics grouping as key to "contributing to world economic growth and prosperity."

Medvedev said the meeting showed that the Brics format is maturing "and allows us to not only coordinate our efforts but to also make concrete decisions."

A joint statement emphasized the group's intent to see a "multipolar, equitable and democratic world order" that would result from a shake-up of the United Nations and global financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to better reflect the aspirations of their emerging economies.

It also spoke of "the importance of maintaining relative stability of major reserve currencies and sustainability of fiscal policies in order to achieve a strong, long-term balanced economic growth."

That vague clause appeared to refer to China's reluctance to unlink its Yuan from the US dollar -- a policy that has boosted China's exports but raised cries of unfair currency manipulation by countries including the United States.

Missing from the statement was any mention of Iran, even though a push by Western nations to obtain more UN sanctions against the Islamic republic figured strongly in several meetings on the sidelines of the Brics meeting.

A trilateral summit between Brazil, India and South Africa held just before the Brics summit agreed that more diplomacy was required in the international standoff with Iran over its controversial nuclear program.

Lula, Singh and South African President Jacob Zuma "recognized the right of Iran to develop nuclear programs for peaceful purposes," and underlined "the need for a peaceful and diplomatic solution of the issue."



Quake survivor Sonammon, 52, who lost ten members of her family from a quake, which has killed 760 in China's remote Qinghai province on April 14, gestures in prayer while holding onto her nephew.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Vote counting begins in Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

Vote counting began yesterday in Sudan's first multi-party election in over two decades following a five-day ballot marked by delays, logistical problems and an opposition boycott.

Six National Election Commission officials at a polling station in Amarat Khartoum were seen checking the state of the plastic ballot boxes before opening the first ones at around 8:30 am (0530 GMT).

Ballot papers were then placed on a large table in two piles and counting began under the watchful eye of local observers and representatives of various political parties.

Israeli troops kill Palestinian gunman

AP, Gaza City

Israeli troops killed a Palestinian militant yesterday along the border fence between Israel and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, Israeli and Palestinian officials said.

The military said troops spotted the gunman early Friday as he planted a bomb along the fence, a tactic used often by Gaza militants.

Syria denies scud missile charge

BBC ONLINE

Syria has denied Israeli accusations it had supplied scud missiles to the militant group Hizbullah.

Israeli President Shimon Peres had accused Damascus on Tuesday of shipping the long-range missiles to guerrillas in the south of Lebanon.

RED SHIRT MOVEMENT

Leader's escapade leads to another defeat of govt

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's political crisis took a surreal twist yesterday when an anti-government protest leader climbed down a hotel facade with a rope to evade arrest and drove off with two police officers taken hostage by his supporters.

Arisman Pongruangrong's escapade was the latest embarrassment for the government, which less than 30 minutes earlier had announced on national television that security forces were surrounding the hotel to arrest Arisman and other leaders holed up inside.

Authorities have tried without success to end a month long sit-in by tens of thousands of "Red Shirt" protesters in some of Bangkok's most popular shopping and tourist districts. At least 24 people were killed last week when troops tried to clear one group of protesters.

Friday's failed crackdown signalled the government was willing to risk another confrontation with the Red Shirts, who are campaigning to oust Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, dissolve Parliament and hold new elections.

But it only served to anger the Red Shirts, who immediately declared a "war" on the government.

CHINA QUAKE

Hungry survivors desperately await help

Death toll rises to 791, 300 missing

AFP, Jiugu

Hungry and dazed survivors of China's earthquake waited desperately for a relief response to kick in yesterday as the government rushed supplies to the isolated area high on the Tibetan plateau.

Preparations were under way for the cremation of hundreds of victims of the disaster, which killed at least 791 people, as concern turned toward possible disease outbreaks in the stricken town of Jiugu in Qinghai province.

An AFP journalist saw the bodies of 600 people laid out on the floor of a warehouse-like structure at the main Tibetan Buddhist monastery overlooking the town, with locals saying they were to be cremated beginning Saturday morning.

The wail of sirens and stench of death filled the air as relief vehicles thundered through the hard-hit town in Yushu county near the epicentre of Wednesday's quake.

Thousands of survivors of the 6.9 magnitude earthquake waited for large-scale shipments of food

and other aid after spending two freezing and hungry nights without food or shelter.

"I have lost everything," a distraught ethnic Tibetan woman who gave her name as Sonaman told AFP.

Wandering the streets with her four-year-old nephew tucked under her coat, Sonaman, 52, said through tears that her mother, father, and sister had died.

"My house has been destroyed. It's been flattened. My family lost 10 people. We have nothing. We have nothing to eat."

The death toll looked set to climb with another 300 people feared trapped under rubble as Premier Wen Jiabao called for all-out efforts to find survivors in a tour of the area Friday.

"We will make all-out efforts to build a new Yushu," Wen told victims, according to official Xinhua news agency, a day after urging rescuers to step up search efforts.

The quake flattened thousands of the mud and wood homes inhabited by ethnic Tibetans, who

make up more than 90 percent of the region's people, and also heavily damaged sturdier concrete structures such as schools.

State media said the dead included 103 students and 12 teachers as schools and dormitories collapsed, with dozens more buried or missing.

The casualties recalled the devastating 2008 earthquake in neighbouring Sichuan province, in which thousands of students were among the 87,000 killed or missing in that disaster amid allegations shoddy construction was to blame.

Homeless Jiugu residents expressed fears about disease due to large numbers of human and animal bodies left rotting in the open.

At a briefing in Beijing, government officials said no signs of epidemic had yet been seen but pledged stepped-up efforts to head off the threat.

"(Authorities) have already started treating human waste and bodies in the disaster-stricken area to prevent any dangerous impact on the local environment," said Chen Xianyi, a health ministry official.

Myanmar urges vigilance after deadly blasts

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar state media urged vigilance at annual water festivities to be on guard yesterday after bomb blasts killed eight people at a park in the military-ruled country's biggest city.

People should "remain vigilant against potential atrocities" and inform the authorities if they see anything suspicious, the English-language New Light of Myanmar newspaper said.

Officials had initially reported that nine people died Thursday in three explosions near Kandawgyi Lake in the former capital Yangon, but later said they had miscounted the number of fatalities.

State media said 170 people were wounded in the park, where thousands of people were gathered for water-throwing festivities to mark the Buddhist New Year.

It was the worst bomb attack in Yangon since a series of blasts in May 2005 at two supermarkets and a convention centre killed 23 people. The junta blamed those explosions on exile groups.

Thursday's blasts came as the country prepares for elections planned for this year that critics have dismissed as a sham due to the

effective barring of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi because she is a serving prisoner.

The United States condemned Thursday's attacks and said it was unsure about the motivation.

"We condemn any kind of violence that victimises innocent civilians," said State Department spokesman Philip Crowley.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to those who were the victims of this bombing," he said.

Washington maintains sanctions on the regime but initiated a cautious dialogue with the junta last year, concluding that the previous US policy of trying to isolate the regime had failed.

Hundreds of revellers returned to the same park Friday on the final day of the Thingyan New Year festival, watched by dozens of police officers.

State television said late Thursday that an investigation had begun to find the "destructionists" behind the explosions.

Myanmar has been hit by several bomb blasts in recent years, which the junta has blamed on armed exile groups or ethnic rebels.

The military has ruled Myanmar since 1962, partly justifying its grip on power by the need to fend off ethnic rebellions that have plagued remote border areas for decades.

Obama sets courses to conquer space

AFP, Kennedy Space Centre

President Barack Obama set a bold new course for the future of US space travel when he announced plans to send US astronauts into the orbit of Mars within the next three decades.

The US leader on Thursday also sought to quell a storm of outrage caused by earlier administration plans, vowing before Nasa staff that he was "100 percent committed" to their mission and to the future of the US space agency.

"I believe that space exploration is not a luxury, it's not an afterthought in America's quest for a brighter future. It is an essential part of that quest," he told a crowd at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida.

Obama made a whirlwind trip after stinging criticism of his decision to end the costly Constellation program, a project to return US astronauts to the moon.

Hillary presses Israel to start peace talks

BBC ONLINE

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has again called on Israel to do more to pursue peace with the Palestinians.

She urged Israel to support efforts by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to strengthen institutions.

Hillary also called on the Palestinians to promote peace by ending incitement and fighting corruption.

Jewish settlement construction has caused deep strain in relations between the US and Israel and has hampered efforts to revive peace talks.

The secretary of state said supporting the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas was the best weapon to counter Hamas and other extremists.

The US has been trying to launch proximity talks between the two sides.

These were knocked off course by an announcement that Israel had approved plans for 1,600 new homes in the East Jerusalem settlement of Ramat Shlomo during a visit to Israel by US Vice-President Joe Biden.

'BOLD LEADERSHIP'

The secretary of state called for "bold leadership" on all sides when she spoke at a dinner attended by the ambassadors of Israel and several Arab states.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu has embraced the vision of the two-state solution," Hillary said.

"But easing up on access and movement in the West Bank, in response to credible Palestinian security performance, is not sufficient to prove to the Palestinians that this embrace is sincere."

"We encourage Israel to continue building momentum toward a comprehensive peace by demonstrating respect for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians, stopping settlement activity and addressing the humanitarian needs in Gaza, and to refrain from unilateral statements and actions that could undermine trust or risk prejudicing the outcome of talks," she added.

Israel has occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since 1967. It insists Jerusalem will remain its undivided capital, while Palestinians want to establish the capital of their state in the East Jerusalem.