

Pakistan, UN launch \$120m flood victim scheme

AFP, Islamabad/ Brussels

Pakistan and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) yesterday launched a 120 million dollar programme to help people rebuild their lives following the country's recent devastating floods.

The European Commission has decided to more than double its Pakistan flood aid to 150 million euros (205 million dollars), the European Union's humanitarian aid chief said Friday.

The EU's executive arm has already provided 70 million euros in aid and will now distribute another 80 million euros to its partner organisations, European humanitarian aid commissioner Kristalina Georgieva told a news conference.

"The one-year programme, which is part of a broader UN emergency response plan, aims at restoring livelihoods through job creation, repairing basic community infrastructure," the UN agency said in a statement.

Torrential rain began falling in northwestern Pakistan in July and the floods have since moved slowly south, wiping out villages and farmland and affecting an area roughly the size of England.

The United Nations has issued a record two-billion-dollar appeal for funds to cope with the disaster, which UN agencies say affected 21 million people and left 12 million in need of emergency food aid.

Musharraf forms political party

BBC ONLINE

Former Pakistan military ruler Perviz Musharraf has launched his new political party, the All Pakistan Muslim League, in London.

Musharraf said Pakistanis felt "despondency and hopelessness" and he vowed a "Jihad against poverty, hunger, illiteracy and backwardness".

He earlier told the BBC the government in Pakistan was dysfunctional and the economy and the country were failing.

Correspondents say there is no real likelihood of him returning soon. Musharraf also appears to lack the kind of political organisation that could win him an election in Pakistan, they say.

'NATIONAL SALVATION' Musharraf unveiled the All Pakistan Muslim League at a gentlemen's club in Whitehall.

There was tight security, with checks on all those entering the room.

Musharraf attacked the "total despondency and demoralisation and hopelessness, which prevails in society today".

He added: "The time has come to redeem our pledge... to ensure the fruits of freedom are shared by all. The time has come for a new social contract to keep the dream of our forefathers alive... to make Pakistan into a progressive Islamic state for others in the third world to emulate."

Musharraf said he wanted a party of national salvation that would "galvanise all Pakistanis regardless of religion, caste or creed".

Punctuated by chants from supporters, he added: "It is time to unfurl a Muslim league



umbrella for all - this umbrella for all shall be the All Pakistan Muslim League."

ADMITS MISTAKES

Musharraf also apologised for some of the actions he took when in power.

"I am aware of the fact that there were some decisions which I took which resulted in negative political repercussions, repercussions which had adverse effects on nation building and national political events, and my popularity also, may I say, plummeted in that last year. I take this opportunity to sincerely apologise to the whole nation."

The former army chief, who now lives in London, earlier told the BBC: "When there is a dysfunctional government and the nation is going down, its economy is going down, there is a clamour, there is a pressure on the military by the people."

He said he was launching the party in London because he risked assassination if he returned to Pakistan. He has survived a number of plots in the past.

Last month, Musharraf told the BBC he would be standing for a seat in the 2013 parliamentary elections. From there he said he hoped to become either prime minister or president.

He made London his base, as a number of Pakistani politicians have done over the years, after his allies lost elections and he was ousted as president in 2008.

If he does go home, he faces legal cases, which he says are politically motivated.

Musharraf seized power in 1999 when, as chief of Pakistan's army, he ousted elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup.

China launches Moon mission

BBC ONLINE

A Chinese rocket carrying a probe destined for the Moon has blasted into space.

A Long March 3C rocket with the Chang'e-2 probe took off from Xichang launch centre at about 1100 GMT.

The rocket will shoot the craft into the trans-lunar orbit, after which the satellite is expected to reach the Moon in about five days.

Chang'e-2 will be used to test key technologies and collect data for future landings.

China will send a rover on its next mission and it also has ambitions to put humans on the surface of the lunar body at some future date.

The Xinhua News Agency said Chang'e-2 would circle just 15km (nine miles) above the rocky terrain in order to take photographs of possible landing locations.

It is China's second lunar probe - the first was launched in 2007. The craft stayed in space for 16 months before being intentionally crashed on to the Moon's surface.

China launched its first manned flight into low-Earth orbit in 2003; and two more followed, with the most recent one in 2008.

So far, only three countries have managed to independently send humans into space: China, Russia and the US.

In 2008, a Chinese astronaut, fighter pilot Zhai Zhigang, performed a space walk - the first in his country's history.

He stayed outside the Shenzhou-7 capsule for 15 minutes; the exercise was seen as key to China's ambition to build an orbiting station in the near future.



A Long March 3C rocket carrying the Chang'e-2 lunar probe, which will go into orbit within 15 kilometres (nine miles) of the moon, blasts off from the launch centre in Xichang in the southwestern province of Sichuan yesterday. China celebrated 61 years of communist rule with the launch of its second lunar probe -- the next step in its ambitious programme to become the second country to put a man on the moon. PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Security and emergency personnel stand near a damaged car following a blast in Abuja during Nigeria's 50th independence anniversary ceremony yesterday. Explosions rocked independence celebrations and killed at least eight people following threats from oil militants, witnesses and a police source said.

Nigerian independence celebration marred by blasts; 8 killed

AFP, Abuja

Two car bombings close to where Nigeria was marking 50 years of independence killed eight people in the capital following a warning from oil militants, police said yesterday.

The explosions that rocked the area near Abuja's Eagle Square failed to halt the anniversary celebrations attended by the country's leaders and foreign delegations.

"There were two car bomb explosions," police spokesman Moshood Jimoh told AFP. "Eight people who were bystanders were confirmed dead and three people seriously injured."

A senior police officer and a top intelligence officer were among the dead, colleagues from their respective services said.

"There were more casualties at the second explosion because the first explosion drew crowds to the scene, which is close to the second explosion," an intelligence officer said.

Firefighters, police and bomb disposal experts were at the scene about 10 minutes' walk from the square, where at least 10 cars were destroyed while glass and blood could be seen on the ground.

The area near a federal court building was filled with smoke, and authorities were cordoning it off and pushing journalists back. An AFP journalist counted six bodies as emergency workers moved in with bodybags.

Independence celebrations, however, continued nearby, with a military parade in progress, music and cheering.

"We heard the first explosion and rushed there," one witness who refused to be named

told AFP. "All of a sudden we heard another loud explosion behind us."

The blasts followed a warning of explosions from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta militant group, who said those attending the independence celebrations should evacuate.

"With due respect to all invited guests, dignitaries and attendees of the 50th independence anniversary of Nigeria being held today... the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is asking everyone to begin immediate evacuation of the entire area within the next 30 minutes," it said.

"This warning expires after 10:30 Hrs (0930 GMT). Several explosive devices have been successfully planted in and around the venue by our operatives working inside the government security services. In evacuating the area, keep a safe distance from vehicles and trash bins."

MEND has staged scores of attacks in the oil-rich Niger Delta in recent years, claiming to be fighting for a fairer distribution of oil revenue.

However, thousands of oil militants signed up to a government amnesty programme last year and unrest in the region has been greatly reduced.

MEND has usually attacked pipelines and other oil industry installations in the past, and Friday's explosions were believed to be their first strike in the capital if the group is proved to be responsible.

"There is nothing worth celebrating after 50 years of failure," MEND said in its statement.

"For 50 years, the people of the Niger Delta have had their land and resources stolen from them."

Koreas agree to 1st family reunions

AP, Seoul

Red Cross officials from the two Koreas agreed yesterday to hold reunions for families separated by the Korean War amid mixed signals from North Korea on easing tensions over the sinking of a South Korean ship.

One hundred families from each country will attend the meetings from Oct 26-27 to Oct 26-27 to discuss ways to hold reunions regularly as well as other unspecified humanitarian issues, the ministry said.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency confirmed the agreement, noting in a dispatch from Pyongyang that the reunions will bring "great joy" to all Koreans.

Millions of families were separated following the 1950-53 Korean War, which ended with a cease-fire, not a peace treaty, leaving the two countries technically at war.

EU, US press Netanyahu, Abbas over peace talks

AFP, Jerusalem

International diplomatic efforts to salvage the Middle East peace talks kicked into high gear yesterday with top EU and US officials set for a flurry of meetings in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

In Jerusalem, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton was meeting with Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu shortly after the Israeli premier had sat down for talks with US envoy George Mitchell, EU and Israeli officials said.

Speaking at the start of the meeting, Netanyahu reiterated his desire to extend curbs on settlement building in the West Bank -- a move which may well scupper the negotiations.

"We are making efforts together with Senator Mitchell to continue to hold talks with President Abbas," he said in a statement. "We want the talks to continue and I want that. We have a mission to pursue."

Ashton had on Thursday met with Abbas shortly after arriving for 24 hours of intensive talks as part of US and EU efforts to rescue peace negotiations, which began on September 2 but face collapse over settlement building.

Early on Friday, she also held a breakfast meeting with Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Mitchell was also working the diplomatic scene, holding talks morning with Netanyahu, before he set off for Ramallah for more discussions with Abbas at about 2:00 pm (1200 GMT), a Palestinian official said.

On Saturday, he was to return to Jerusalem for further talks with Netanyahu, Israel public radio said.

Mitchell and Abbas had held two hours of discussions at the Palestinian leader's Muqataa headquarters on Thursday, but there was no word about the outcome.

"We are determined to continue our efforts to find common ground between the parties to enable the direct negotiations to continue," Mitchell said afterwards, pledging to "continue our efforts intensively" in the coming days.

Both Mitchell and Ashton are fighting to persuade Abbas to stick with the negotiations despite Israel's refusal to extend restrictions on settlement building.

They are also hoping to persuade Netanyahu to reimpose the building ban -- a step that until now he has steadfastly declined to take, largely due to internal political constraints.

The flurry of diplomatic activity came as Israeli media dissected reports Netanyahu had turned down a comprehensive package of benefits in exchange for a two-month extension of the freeze, laid out in a letter from US President Barack Obama.

The White House denied the existence of any letter, and Israeli officials refused to comment on the reports, which emerged earlier this week.

Israel's refusal to extend the moratorium has brought the fledgling talks to the brink of collapse, with the Palestinians threatening to walk out if more Jewish settlements are built on land they want for a future state.

The moratorium expired on Sunday, but the Palestinians have said they will reserve a final decision on whether to withdraw from the talks until after Abbas has conferred with Arab foreign ministers.

Ecuador's president rescued from police uprising

AFP, Quito

Ecuador President Rafael Correa made a triumphant return to the presidential palace after loyalist troops rescued him from a police rebellion amid gunfire and street clashes that left at least two dead.

The Red Cross said two police were killed and 37 people wounded in the operation late Thursday that freed Correa from the National Police Hospital after 12 hours under siege by rebel police who he said wanted to kill him.

"We got him out, we got him out," Interior Vice Minister Edwin Jarrin told AFP.

Hustled to safety by troops and an elite police special operations unit, Correa emerged on a balcony at the presidential palace to a hero's welcome from cheering throngs of supporters.

"We will never negotiate anything under pressure," Correa exulted, telling the crowd that he had told his captors: "Or I come out as the president of a worthy country or I come out as a corpse."

Myanmar abuzz over possible release of Suu Kyi

AP, Yangon

The detention of Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi expires early next month, but officials said yesterday that only the ruling junta chief knows exactly when she will be granted freedom.

The Nobel Peace laureate has been locked away for 15 of the past 21 years, ever since her opposition party swept the country's last elections in 1990, and the military refused to cede power.

Her latest term of house arrest ends Nov 13, just days after the junta plans to hold the first elections since those ignored polls timing that analysts say is hardly coincidental. There is wide speculation the junta will release her as an olive branch to the international community after its expected win in elections that many observers have deemed as rigged as to be meaningless.

But Suu Kyi's detention is considered a matter of national security and officials say any decision to release her would be made at the last-minute by Senior Gen. Than Shwe, the junta chief.

"We can assume that she will be released on Nov 13, but we cannot say with certainty that it will happen. Only the junta chief will know if or when the release can happen," said one of two officials interviewed. "It is too early to say that she will be released on Nov 13."

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy opposition party is boycotting the elections, which it calls unfair and undemocratic. As a result of not registering for the polls, the party has been dissolved, leaving no group that can effectively challenge the junta-backed party, which is expected to sweep the polls.



Babylonian, dead for millennia, alive online

AP, London

The language of the Epic of Gilgamesh and King Hammurabi has found a new life online.

Academics across the world have uploaded audio of Babylonian epics, poems, and even a magic spell to the Internet in an effort to help scholars and laymen understand what the ancient Near East sounded like.

The answer? Cambridge University's Martin Worthington tells The Associated Press it's like a kind of compromise between Italian and Arabic.

Worthington said he got the idea for the project in part because people often ask him how Babylonians spoke and how it's possible to tell when the language has long since died out.

He says the website helps answer that question and give visitors an earful of the 2nd millennium BC.