

CHINA FLOODS

More than one million evacuated

Death toll rises to 168

AFP, Beijing

More than one million people in China have been evacuated following downpours that have raised water levels in rivers to critical highs, and triggered floods and landslides, the government has said.

The summer rains have left at least 168 people dead or missing so far, and weather authorities warned yesterday that flood-hit areas across the southern half of China would experience a fresh round of heavy rainfall.

"These areas must strengthen their prevention of geological disasters," the National Meteorological Centre said.

Authorities have evacuated more than one million people in eight provinces, regions and municipalities since June 9, the civil affairs ministry said late Thursday.

One waterway in the eastern province of Zhejiang has risen to its highest levels in 56 years, while other rivers across southern China have burst their banks, the nation's flood control headquarters added.

Some of the areas being pounded by rain --such as Hubei and Hunan provinces--were only recently in the thralls of a severe drought, which has in some cases made the situation worse.

China is hit by heavy summer rainfalls every year. In 2010, torrential downpours across large swathes of the country triggered the nation's worst floods in a decade, leaving more than 4,300 people dead or missing.

One devastating mudslide in the northwestern province of Gansu killed 1,500 people in August.



A young boy watches the flood waters from the roof of his home in Laibin, southwest China's Guangxi province yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Syrian forces kill six protesters

AFP, Nicosia

Security forces opened fire on Syrian protesters yesterday and killed at least six people, including two in the northern flashpoint city of Homs, activists told AFP in Nicosia.

At least one person was also killed in the eastern city of Deir Ezzor, two in Dael in the southern province of Daraa and one in the Damascus suburb of Douma, the activists said.

Several other people were also wounded, they said, as security forces opened fire on protesters who demonstrated in several parts of the country after weekly Muslim prayers, demanding more freedoms and democracy.

Nearly 10,000 Syrians have crossed the border into Turkey fleeing a crackdown by the Damascus regime, an official source said yesterday.

NEWS IN brief

Nigeria's Islamists claim suicide bombing

AFP, Abuja

A radical Islamist sect has claimed responsibility for Nigeria's first suicide bombing, saying the attack that killed two at Abuja's police headquarters targetted the country's police chief.

"We are responsible for the bomb attack on the police headquarters in Abuja, which was to prove a point to all those who doubt our capability," the group known as Boko Haram said late Thursday after the attack.

UN rights council passes 'historic' gay rights resolution

AFP, Geneva

The UN Human Rights Council yesterday passed a "historic" resolution that seeks equal rights for all regardless of sexual orientation, marking significant progress for gay rights.

The resolution tabled by South Africa passed with 23 votes in favour, 19 against and three abstentions, despite strong opposition from African and Arab states.

Russia to sign French warship buying deal

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Russia will sign a contract for the purchase of two French Mistral-class warships yesterday, the RIA Novosti news agency quoted Russian defence officials as saying.

The contract will be worth \$1.6 billion and be signed between the Russia's Rosobornexport military corporation and DCNS, the warships' French maker, the news report said. RIA Novosti made no mention of two other warships that were part of the initial framework agreement and which were supposed to have been built in Russia at a later date.

Flights resume as ash moves off New Zealand

AFP, Sydney

Flights between Australia and New Zealand were returning to normal yesterday after an ash cloud spewed by a Chilean volcano moved away, almost a week after causing trans-Tasman havoc.

Australia's Qantas, which had banned all flights to New Zealand since Sunday, said it had resumed services to and from Auckland, Wellington and Queenstown but Christchurch routes remained suspended until 0600 GMT.

Gaddafi in talks with Libya's rebels: Russian envoy

Rebels deny any negotiations, Spain expels diplomats

AFP, Tripoli

Muammar Gaddafi's regime is in direct talks with Libya's rebels, a Russian envoy has indicated, as the strongman's son said the way out of a months-long conflict is the staging of elections.

Russia's Mikhail Margelov, in Tripoli for one day on Thursday after visiting the rebels in their Benghazi stronghold last week, made the remarks after meeting Libyan Prime Minister Baghdadi al-Mahmudi.

"I was assured at today's negotiations that direct contacts between Benghazi and Tripoli are already underway," Margelov said, quoted by Russia's ITAR-TASS news agency.

"The Libyan prime minister told me that a round of such contacts concluded yesterday in Paris," he said, adding that French President Nicolas Sarkozy "has been informed of the outcome of these contacts."

He did not disclose the nature of the talks, which could not be confirmed by the rebels' National Transitional Council.

But Libya's opposition denied any engagement in talks with regime.

"I can assure you there is and there was no negotiation between the NTC and the regime," Mahmud Jibril, the head of international affairs in the rebel National Transitional Council, told a news conference in Naples, Italy.

An NTC official, speaking to AFP on Friday on condition of anonymity, said the rebel position was unchanged.

"Gaddafi must go. Anyone from the rebel side who negotiates his staying in power would immediately have an NTC arrest warrant issued against him," the official said.

He spoke after Gaddafi's son Seif al-Islam said elections were the only way forward.

"Elections, immediately and with international supervision. It's the only

painless way to break out of the impasse in Libya," he told Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera.

A US official said such proposals were "a little late" and that the strongman's days in power were numbered.

Meanwhile Spain said it was expelling Libyan ambassador Ageli Abdussalam Ali Breni over the Gaddafi regime's repression of civilians and expelling three embassy officials for unspecified activities.

Two loud blasts meanwhile shook Libya's capital Tripoli following a series of more distant explosions, an AFP reporter said.

Rebels were seen patrolling the streets of Zawit Bagoul, 20 kilometres from Zintan.

The rebels later also moved into Lawania, about seven kilometres away, and then Ghanymma, less than 10 kilometres from Yafraan, as Nato aircraft were heard overhead.

UN Council backs Ban for 2nd term

REUTERS, United Nations

The Security Council yesterday unanimously recommended that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon be elected for a second five-year term beginning in January 2012.

The 192-nation UN General Assembly is planning to formally re-elect the former South Korean foreign minister to the top UN job on Tuesday, diplomats said.

The council's decision was delayed for one day because one of the UN regional groups -- Latin America and the Caribbean -- had not agreed to endorse Ban.

Diplomats said the group had still not achieved consensus by yesterday morning, but the council went ahead with its recommendation.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters march towards a theatre where Immigration Minister Chris Bowen was delivering a speech on the government's refugee programme at the University of NSW in Sydney yesterday. The Australian government faces a High Court challenge to its plan to send boat people to Malaysia or elsewhere offshore, with lawyers saying the deal would break up a family.

Jamuna urea factory

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On April 2 last year, the government shut it for an indefinite period.

Following the shutdown, an overhauling of the unit took place at a cost of Tk 16 crore. The repair ended on May 31, but the company could not go on production for gas shortages.

It finally resumed production in mid-July.

Set up in 1991 at Tarakandi in Jamalpur, the JFCL supplies urea to 20 districts, including 16 northern ones.

Regular fluctuation of gas pressure had been causing technical glitches damaging its costly equipment, company sources said.

Meanwhile, 12 skilled master operators left the company in the last one month, as they were getting a low pay. They later flew abroad with high-salary jobs. In addition, the authorities temporarily suspended 14 staff two months ago as

they were trying to find jobs in foreign countries.

Also, corruption by a section of officials and collective bargaining agent (CBA) leaders put the company into a deep crisis, they claimed.

Contacted, JFCL Managing Director Achinta Kumar Dev could not tell when they can resume production. He refused to talk about the suspension of some staff and alleged corruption.

On Thursday, the Nagorik Committee in Sarishabari brought out a procession and demonstrated before JFCL demanding smooth gas supply for the company and immediate resumption of urea production.

Speakers at the demonstration threatened of tougher movement if production does not resume by Sunday.

Greece axes finance minister amid debt crisis

AFP, Athens

Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou axed his finance minister yesterday amid the country's crippling dead crisis, promoting defence minister Evangelos Venizelos to the post, a spokesman said.

Papandreou moved George Papaconstantinou to the environment ministry, a move analysts see as a demotion.

Venizelos, a 54-year-old party veteran who had challenged Papandreou for the party leadership in 2007, was also promoted to deputy prime minister alongside Theodoros Pangalos, outgoing government spokesman George Petalotis said in a televised address.

The new finance minister, who hails from the northern metropolis of Thessaloniki, is a constitutional expert and gifted speaker who previously headed Greece's frenetic



George Papaconstantinou

preparations for the 2004 Olympic Games.

The announcement came a day after a party revolt by backbenchers disgruntled by Papandreou's handling of the country's debt crisis and his failure to agree on a unity government with opposition leaders.

Two lawmakers quit their posts and a stormy party meeting ensued in which Papandreou faced down his critics with the backing of key ministers.

Many dissenters have been downgraded and sacked in the reshuffle of the cabinet.

The reshuffle also saw deputy defence minister Panos Beglitis, another close aide of Papandreou, promoted to full minister.

A vote of confidence on the new government is expected to be held as early as Sunday when eurozone ministers are scheduled to meet in an effort to find common ground on saving Greece from a looming debt default.

Sudan troops lock in fresh border clashes

AFP, Khartoum

The armies of north and south Sudan clashed on the country's tense border on Friday, near the flashpoint Abyei region, the southern army spokesman said, less than a month before southern independence.

The United Nations confirmed that there had been an exchange of heavy artillery fire coming from the direction of the Kiir where similar clashes reportedly took place on Wednesday.

Philip Aguer, the spokesman of the Sudan People's Liberation Army of the south confirmed the incident and said south's forces repelled the attacks.

The northern army spokesman could not immediately be reached for comment.

Khaleda unhappy

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issue Tuesday night and some senior leaders supported her observation.

"Most of the time after discussion you [senior leaders] empower me to make the final decision. Then, I finalise it. But surprisingly, such decisions are being leaked. Even before decisions are finalised, some of them get published in newspapers," Khaleda was quoted as saying in the meeting.

Party leaders said the chairperson became angry seeing a news item in dailies on June 10 about the party decision to call for a 36-hour hartal from June 12. "I myself had decided to announce the 36-hour hartal. One or two people knew it. How did it end up in newspapers?" Khaleda

said. The party had declared the hartal on June 10 in a press conference.

While talking to The Daily Star, a senior leader said they had discussed the hartal in the standing committee meeting and agreed to go for it but they empowered the chairperson for finalising the date and duration of the hartal.

"So far what I have heard, the chairperson finalised it Thursday night which was scheduled to be declared formally on Friday. But most newspapers published the news on their Friday issues, which was embarrassing for the party," the senior leader said requesting not to be named.

The leader said as a member of the standing committee, the leader was in the

meeting but got the news of the party decision from newspapers. "It seems newspapers are announcing programmes and we are implementing," the leader added.

A number of party leaders, however, said Khaleda made the crucial decision in consultation with a few of her close aides. Most of the time, she herself makes the final decisions before or after the standing committee meetings, which is usually convened to hold discussions. She did not even share her decision in the meeting this time, they said.

They said some senior members urged the chairperson to identify the people who were behind the leakage.