

Severe cold grips North India

PTI, New Delhi

North India continued to reel under the bitter chill yesterday as Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir recorded its coldest night of this winter and icy winds swept several parts of the region. The minimum temperature recorded in Srinagar last night was minus 7.8 deg C.

The plains of Punjab and Haryana also remained the grip of the cold wave where Narnaul was the coldest at 2 deg C. Cold winds swept Chandigarh where the low settled at 5.4 deg C. In Punjab, Amritsar recorded a low of 4.8 deg C followed by Patiala at 5.3 deg C and Ludhiana at 6.2 deg C.

The weather office, meanwhile, warned of heavy rainfall, snowfall and hail storms in various parts of Himachal Pradesh during the next 48 hours. The high altitude tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh reeled under biting cold wave with the minimum temperatures ranging between minus 17 and minus 28 deg C.

The cold wave also maintained its grip over Rajasthan.

Studies

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Yesterday, forty one days after the act of sheer brutality, Jui started writing again, using the right hand after doctors fixed a splint to it.

"I am so excited and happy I cannot spell it out at this moment," she said with a shout of joy.

"After the incident, I had abandoned all hope of writing again with the right hand. And, therefore, I had been practising writing with my left hand so that I can take part in the HSC exams," she said, adding that she can carry on other tasks as well.

Expressing her firm intention to study further, Jui asked all to pray for her so that her dream, which her husband had tried to shatter, comes true.

With this recovery, Jui will also be able to eat food with a spoon in her right hand.

On December 4 last year, her husband Rafiqul Islam, an expatriate worker in the UAE, chopped off her fingers with a machete.

After primary treatment, Jui was taken back to her father's house in Narsingdi. Later, doctors at the Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP) in Savar took her under their care on January 7 and within a week they made the girl write and do other tasks with her right hand.

A splint has been attached between the remaining part of her thumb and wrist to help her hold the pen properly while another device for using a spoon.

Asked, Jui said she felt no pain and did not face much difficulty in carrying out her tasks with her "new right hand".

ATM Abdur Razzak, head of medical services of CRP, told The Daily Star that a 10-doctor team following the last seven days' work had accomplished the feat.

As she lost all of her right-hand fingers, she will also be provided with a cosmetic glove for a better look of her hand," Razzak added.

Before damaging the hand, her husband, saying he had a surprise for her, took Jui to a room of his sister's house in the capital's Cantonment area. There he blindfolded the girl, gagged her and also tied her hands.

While Jui was waiting for a "surprise" and extended her right hand to get it, the man did something else, which was indeed the shock of a lifetime.

She was left to bleed for nearly three hours and Rafiq dumped the severed part into a dustbin.

"My only fault was that I wanted to study despite my husband's objections," Jui said, recalling the incident.

Her separated fingers could not be fixed to the limb as their cells had become inactive by the time they were collected from the dustbin and brought to the doctors.

France and Austria were at risk because of their banks' exposure to the debt of peripheral euro-zone countries.

Zardari meets

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newspaper, DawnNews reported.

The unscheduled talks come against the background of shaky ties between Zardari's weak civilian administration and the military over a probe into a mysterious memo that sought US help in curbing the army's power.

"Chief of the army staff General Ashfaq Kayani called on President Zardari in his office today," the president's spokesman Farhatullah Babar told AFP.

He gave few details about the meeting beyond that, saying the "current security situation came under discussion".

Kayani, widely regarded as the most powerful figure in Pakistan, is also scheduled to attend a meeting of a defence committee later yesterday which comprises senior ministers and military chiefs.

"The committee is likely to discuss matters related to defence and national security," a government official said.

He declined to comment when asked whether the meeting, to be chaired by Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, would help defuse tension between the civilian and military leadership.

Pakistan has been under military dictatorships for about half its history since independence in 1947, its civilian leaders thrown out in three coups.

Euro crisis

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Germany was the only country to emerge totally unscathed with its triple-A rating and a stable outlook.

French Finance Minister Francois Baroin, speaking after an emergency meeting with President Nicolas Sarkozy, played down the impact of Europe's second-biggest economy being downgraded to AA+ for the first time since 1975.

"This is not a catastrophe. It's an excellent rating. But it's not good news," Baroin told France 2 television, saying the government would not respond with further austerity measures.

The euro fell by more than a cent to \$1.2650 on the news. European stocks, which had been up for the day, turned negative, but reaction to the widely anticipated news was moderate. Safe-haven German 10-year bond futures rose to a new record high while the risk premium that investors charge on French, Spanish, Italian and Belgian debt widened.

Euro-zone finance ministers responded jointly by saying in a statement they had taken "far-reaching measures" in response to the sovereign debt crisis and were accelerating reforms toward stronger economic union.

The double blow of the S&P news and the stalling of the Greek debt talks came after a brighter start to the year with Spain and Italy beginning their marathon debt rollover at lower borrowing costs this week.

S&P said the eurozone faced stresses, including tightening credit conditions, rising risk premiums for a growing number of sovereigns, simultaneous deleveraging by governments and households, and weakening economic growth prospects.

It cited political obstacles to a solution to the crisis due to "an open and prolonged dispute among European policymakers over the proper approach to address challenges."

Austerity and budget discipline alone were not sufficient to fight the debt crisis and risked becoming self-defeating, the ratings agency said.

German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble played down the news, saying: "In the past months, we've come to agree that the ratings agencies' judgments should not be overvalued."

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Pakistan quells attack on police base, 11 killed

AFP, Peshawar

But despite current tensions, analysts say another coup is unlikely and they instead predict early elections, possibly in the first half of this year.

The "Memogate" scandal centres on an unsigned note allegedly sent by an aide of Zardari to the US military last May, apparently to avert a possible coup after the killing of Osama bin Laden by the US in Pakistan.

The memo has pitted the army against Zardari's government and the Supreme Court is now tasked with deciding whether the government endorsed the note, and if so, if it can remain in power.

Gilani earlier this week accused the army and intelligence chiefs of failing to make their submissions to the commission investigating the memo through government channels, in an unusually bold interview with Chinese media.

The army vociferously denied Gilani's accusation and said it had passed its response through the defence ministry to the court in accordance with the law, ratcheting up tensions between the two sides.

Yesterday's defence committee meeting is, among other items, expected to finalise recommendations to frame new rules of engagement with Nato following the November 26 air strikes on a border post that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers.

Shiplu's friend Mahfuzur Rahman Shifat, who witnessed the tragedy, said

"Around 50 people, mostly children, were flying kites on the rooftops of adjacent six-storey buildings since morning. Around 1:00pm, I saw Shiplu running for a stray kite."

"Within a few moments, he fell into the narrow gap between two buildings. I peeped onto the ground only to see him lying in a pool of blood."

Hearing the scream of others, neighbours rushed to the spot and took him to National Medical College Hospital and then to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead around at 2:30pm.

When this correspondent visited the fourth floor flat of the victim's family, his mother Shewli Begum crying uncontrollably, was heard saying, "I asked my son repeatedly to come down and have lunch in time but he did not. And everything ended. How can I bear this pain?"

Shiplu's father cloth trader Jamal Akram fainted repeatedly.

It was found that their building has no staircase leading to the rooftop and no railing around it. People can come to the rooftop from the adjacent buildings with a gap of only two feet in between.

John Chambers, chairman of S&P's sovereign rating committee, said preserving that status would require the four remaining AAA-rated guarantors to increase their commitments.

That could prove politically unpopular. Voters in Germany, Finland and the Netherlands have resisted lending more support to what they consider less prudent eurozone countries.

In their statements, Eurozone finance ministers said they would do all they could to ensure the rescue fund keeps its top rating.

KSA restricts

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reported The Saudi Gazette yesterday.

The ministry has issued instructions to all the government departments in this regard.

The directives, based on a royal order issued in 2007, have gone out to the offices of the emirs in different provinces and other relevant bodies.

The decision will not have any effect on thousands of Bangladeshi nationals living in the kingdom on job visas.

The order came after a Saudi woman, married to a Bangladeshi man, successfully appealed for the renewal of her children's residency permit (Iqama).

It, however, exempts sons and daughters of Saudi mothers.

Medwah Aal Medwah, a security expert, said the exemption takes into consideration the family structure and avoids the "tragedy of family separations that could face Saudi women married to Bangladeshi".

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Little hope of consensus

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tenure expires in early February.

President Zillur Rahman, on the advice of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, however opened talks with the political parties on December 22 seeking their opinion over the formation of a new EC. By the time the talks concluded on Thursday, 23 political parties, including the ruling AL and main opposition BNP, joined the talks.

The attackers targeted the main police station in Dera Ismail Khan city near the lawless tribal region, provincial information minister Mian Iftikhar Hussain told AFP.

Three suicide bombers detonated themselves and one was shot dead by the army, police chief of the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Akbar Hoti told AFP.

"Army and police units have entered the police station and a search operation is over," he said after an operation lasting over two hours.

Of them, 13 political parties, including the BNP, strongly proposed a restoration of the caretaker government system although it was not on the agenda. Six parties, including the AL and Jatiya Party, opposed the CG system either at the dialogue or outside. Two of the remaining four parties that did not say anything on this issue had earlier talked in favour of the CG.

The number in favour of the CG would have been more had two other components of the BNP-led four-party alliance -- Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Okya Jote -- been invited to the talks.

Most of the parties proposed the enactment of a law in line with the constitutional provision to ensure the formation of a controversy-free EC.

The BNP-led opposition parties demonstrated largely a positive gesture by joining the talks with the president informed on matters of domestic and foreign policy, and submit for the consideration of the Cabinet any matter which the President may request him to refer to it.

Either the ruling AL or the government may open talks with the opposition to resolve the stalemate. The premier may also advise the president to open talks with the parties to this end before the political situation gets volatile and confrontational further.

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Stampede kills 10 in India

AFP, New Delhi

At least 10 people, including six women, were crushed to death in the middle of the night