

Obama mourns victims of huge tornado

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday bemoaned the empty spaces where homes and schools once stood as he vowed to stand with people of Oklahoma, where lives were sliced apart by a huge tornado.

Obama said that Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) chief Craig Fugate was on his way to Oklahoma City, where the massive twister hit the suburb of Moore on Monday, claiming at least 24 lives. Some of those killed were children under 12, caught in an elementary school by a murderous two-mile wide funnel of wind.

"Dozens of people lost their lives, many more were injured and among the victims were young children trying to take shelter in the safest place they knew," Obama said at the White House.

Describing the storm as one of the "most destructive tornados in history," Obama said that the federal government would play a major role in the rescue effort in Moore and the rebuilding program to come.

"The people of Moore should know that their country will remain on the ground there for them, beside them as long as it takes for their homes and schools to rebuild," Obama said.

"There are empty spaces where there used to be living rooms and bedrooms and classrooms and in time we're going to need to refill those spaces with love and laughter and community," Obama said. The US government put in force a now well drilled emergency plan even before the storm hit, which was forged in the days following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when a botched federal response had serious political consequences.



DEADLIEST US TORNADOES

March 18, 1925, in Missouri, Illinois and Indiana.

695 deaths.

The tornado remains the deadliest in US history.

April 9, 1947, in Woodward, Oklahoma.

181 deaths.

It was almost two miles wide and traveled 100 miles per hour. More than 100 blocks in Woodward were levelled and over 1,000 homes and businesses destroyed.

May 22, 2011, in Joplin, Missouri.

158 deaths.

More than 1,000 people were injured and almost \$3billion worth of damage was caused.

June 8, 1953, in Flint, Michigan.

116 deaths.

The Flint tornado is rated as a F5 on the Fujita scale - the strongest possible.

March 23, 1913, in Omaha, Nebraska.

103 deaths.

It was so strong that steel train cars were later found pierced by pieces of debris from destroyed houses.

TORNADO TERROR STRIKES OKLAHOMA

(Clockwise from left) A local resident takes a picture of the monstrous twister as it barreled towards the heavily-populated Oklahoma City suburb; a vehicle lies upside down in the road after the tornado ripped through the area; a teacher carries a injured schoolchildren near the collapsed Plaza Towers Elementary School in Moore on Monday. The tornado, reported to be at least EF4 strength and two miles wide, killed at least 24 people.



PHOTO: AFP



GUATEMALA WAR CRIMES

Procedural error lets ex-dictator off the hook

AFP, Guatemala City

Guatemala's Constitutional Court on Monday struck down the 80-year sentence given to former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt as well as his conviction for genocide and war crimes on procedural error.

The ruling, by three votes to two, annulled all proceedings that took place after the trial was temporarily halted on April 19 due to a technicality.

This overturned the May 10 conviction but left most of the trial and testimony intact.

It was not immediately clear whether the proceedings from April 19 could be repeated, nor whether Ríos Montt, 86, would remain in prison.

"The sentence is hereby annulled" on appeal from Ríos Montt's lawyers, said Constitutional Court spokesman Martín Guzmán.

The court upheld the lawyers' claim of a procedural error during the trial and there-



Ríos Montt

fore struck down the conviction and sentencing.

The procedural error occurred when the court that convicted the former dictator refused to review an appeal put forward by defense attorney Francisco García, the constitutional court said.

Human rights groups involved in the case declined to comment immediately.

Ríos Montt's conviction made him the first Latin American ex-dictator to be convicted of trying to exterminate an entire people, during a brief but particularly gruesome stretch of a war that started in 1960, dragged on for 36 years and left around 200,000 people dead or missing.

Some 200,000 people were killed or vanished without a trace in the country's 1960-1996 civil war, according to a 1999 UN-sponsored report. More than 90 percent of the human rights violations took place between 1978 and 1984.

NEWSIN brief

Obama, Xi meet in June

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama will hold his first summit with President Xi Jinping in California next month, with Sino-US relations rattled by alleged Chinese cyber spying and tensions in the Pacific.

Obama will welcome Xi to the plush Sunnyslands estate resort in Palm Springs on June 7-8, as Washington seeks Chinese help to subdue North Korean belligerence and seeks a diplomatic breakthrough to end the

Blasts in Iraq kill at least 12

REUTERS, Kirkuk

Several bomb blasts killed at least 12 people in Iraq yesterday, police said, a day after more than 70 died in attacks on majority Shias, stoking fears of all-out sectarian war with minority Sunnis.

More than 200 people have been killed in the past week as Sunni-Shia tensions, fuelled by the civil war in neighbouring Syria, threaten to plunge Iraq back into communal bloodletting.

More than 700 people died violently in April, according to the United Nations, the highest monthly figure in almost five years. Iraq suffered a frenzy of Sunni-Shi'ite violence in 2006-07, when monthly death tolls sometimes topped 3,000.

Imran to leave hospital today

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani politician Imran Khan is to leave hospital today, his party and medics said yesterday, two weeks after breaking bones in his back in a fall at an election rally.

The 60-year-old was ordered by doctors to remain immobile in a hospital bed with fractured vertebrae and a broken rib after falling from a hoist raising him to the stage at a rally just days before the May 11 general election.

China factory blast kills 13

AFP, Beijing

A blast which ripped through an explosives plant in China has left 13 people dead and another 20 missing, an official said yesterday, compounding the country's poor industrial safety record.

Another 19 people were injured in the explosion on Monday at a three-storey workshop owned by Poly Explosives (Jinan), the Xinhua news agency reported.

Safety standards are regularly flouted in China, and workplace accidents remain common despite repeated pledges by the govern-

Syria, Israel exchange fire in Golan Heights

BBC ONLINE

Israeli and Syrian forces yesterday exchanged fire across the ceasefire line in the occupied Golan Heights.

Israel returned fire after one of its military vehicles was hit by shots from Syria, Israel's defence forces say. Media reports say no-one was hurt.

Syria says it destroyed an Israeli vehicle which it says crossed the ceasefire line into territory its forces control.

Syria and Israel have traded fire a number of times in recent weeks. The Israeli military said its troops "returned precise fire" after the vehicle was hit.

It warned that any attempts to violate its sovereignty would be "met with immediate and firm retaliation".

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has previously accused Israel of aiding the

rebels, but has not provided substantive evidence.

Speaking after Tuesday's incident, Israeli chief of staff Lt Gen Benny Gantz said Israel would not allow the Golan to become "a comfortable sphere for Assad to operate from", warning the Syrian leader would "bear the consequences" if the situation deteriorated.

Tensions between Israel and Syria have soared this year, with Israel carrying out three air strikes on Syria to stop the transfer of advanced weapons to the militant Islamist movement Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Syria and Israel have been in a state of war since 1948 but the border had been relatively calm in recent years.

Israel has occupied the Golan Heights since the 1967 war. It annexed the territory in 1981, in a move that has not been recognised by the international community.



Ray Manzarek

Doors co-founder dies

STAR DESK

Ray Manzarek, a founding member with The Doors whose keyboard work was a touchstone of hits like Break On Through and Light My Fire, has died at the age of 74 after a battle with cancer. The musician died at a clinic in Rosenheim, Germany, surrounded by members of his family.

Manzarek formed the Doors after a chance meeting in July 1965 on Venice Beach, Los Angeles, with Jim Morrison, who was to become the band's vocalist. After they were joined by Robby Krieger on guitar and John Densmore on drums, the band released six albums, all of which were successful.

Paying tribute to him, drummer John Densmore said, "There was no keyboard player on the planet more appropriate to support Morrison's words."

US urges nations to ensure religious freedom

Deplore rising sentiment against Muslims, Jews

AFP, Washington

The United States on Monday denounced what it called a rising tide of both anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment around the world as it urged all nations to ensure freedom of religion.

In a wide-ranging annual report on religious freedom, the State Department voiced alarm at growing attacks against minority groups and painted a bleak picture in nations such as China, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea and Saudi Arabia.

Secretary of State John Kerry, while acknowledging that the US record was not perfect, called religious freedom a "universal value" as he presented the report.

"The freedom to profess and practice one's faith -- to believe or not to believe, or to change one's beliefs -- that is a birthright of every human being," Kerry said.

"I urge all countries, especially those identified in this report, to take action now to safeguard this fundamental freedom," he said.

The State Department report, which covered 2012, said that "anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions were clearly on the rise -- particularly in Europe and Asia."

The report sharply criticised the record of Myanmar, also known as Burma, on the same day that President Thein Sein met with US President Barack Obama in a sign of US support for the former general's democratic reforms.

"On Burma, we didn't see any improve-

ment in religious freedom," said Suzan Johnson Cook, the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, using Myanmar's former name.

The survey said that religious freedom declined further in China and that authorities cracked down particularly hard on the mostly Muslim Uighur community and on Tibetan Buddhists, whose monasteries are under



close watch.

The report said that Muslims also faced new restrictions in 2012 in countries ranging from Belgium, which banned face-covering religious attire in classrooms, to India where schools in Mangalore restricted headscarves.

The report also voiced alarm at soaring violence against Islamic minorities including Shias and Ahmadis in Pakistan, where laws restrict the Ahmadi community from even calling itself Muslim.

China sinkhole devours 5

AFP, Beijing

Five people died when a 10-metre (33 feet) wide sinkhole opened up at the gates of an industrial estate in Shenzhen, the southern Chinese boom town neighbouring Hong Kong, local authorities said yesterday.

The Shenzhen Longgang district government said on its verified page on Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter, that five people had died and added that it was investigating the incident.

The sinkhole formed just outside the Huamao Industrial Park in Shenzhen on Monday evening, at a time when many factory workers would have been changing shifts, according to the website of Beijing-based newspaper the Guangming Daily.

The state-run Shanghai Daily newspaper said that rescuers saved one man.

Reports said it was unclear how many people had fallen into the

hole in total, but the search was continuing on Tuesday.

Sinkholes in China are often blamed on construction works and the country's rapid pace of development.

Surveillance cameras in March captured images of a security guard



being swallowed by a sinkhole, also in Shenzhen.

Two months ago a man was killed when his bedroom was swallowed by a eight metre (25 feet) sinkhole in Florida, in the US.

7 Muslims jailed over riots in Myanmar

BBC ONLINE

Seven Muslims were jailed yesterday for their role in religious clashes in the Myanmar town of Meiktila in March.

One man was jailed for 34 years for killing a monk; the others received sentences ranging from two to 14 years for crimes including unlawful assembly and religious disrespect.

At least 43 people - mostly Muslim - died in the violence that erupted after an argument at a Muslim-owned shop.

So far no Buddhists have been convicted in connection with the deadly clashes.

The monk was knocked down from his motorbike by a group of Muslim men, beaten and killed, according to reports. A boy of about 15 was also convicted alongside the six Muslim men and sentenced to seven years. He will be detained in a juvenile facility.

Apart from the monk, Meiktila's violence was almost entirely directed against the Muslim minority. It sparked small outbreaks of violence in at least three other towns and left more than 12,000 Muslims displaced.

Nigeria retakes 5 Islamist strongholds

AFP, Abuja

Nigeria's military said it had re-established control in five remote areas of the northeast where Islamist insurgents had seized territory, as it pressed on with a sweeping offensive against Boko Haram militants.

Several thousand troops were last week deployed across three states in the volatile region, and fighter jets have pounded Boko Haram camps as the military tries to rid the country of "terrorist activities."

The military has "secured the environs of New Marte, Hausari, Krenoa, Wulgo and Chikun Ngulalo after destroying all the terrorists' camps," a defence ministry statement said on late Monday.

All of the areas recaptured in northern Borno state near the Cameroon border were considered Boko Haram strongholds.

Pak PM-elect supports Taliban peace talks

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's incoming prime minister Nawaz Sharif threw his support behind peace talks with the country's Taliban insurgents, saying it would be a top priority for his new government.

"If Taliban have offered us an option to have dialogue then we should take it seriously," Sharif said while addressing his party's newly elected parliamentarians in the eastern city of Lahore on Monday.

"Terrorism is one of the main problems (facing) Pakistan. Establishment of peace in Pakistan is one of our top (priorities) and we are discussing ways and means to establish peace," he said.

Sharif, whose Pakistan Muslim League (N) won a resounding victory in the May 11 election, is set to serve an unprecedented third term as premier nearly 14 years after he was deposed in a coup.

He expressed support on the campaign trail for peace negotiations with Taliban militants blamed for killing thousands of people in a nearly seven-year insurgency.

Pakistan's umbrella Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) movement in February signalled its willingness to enter peace talks with the government but also stepped up attacks against Sharif's rival Pakistan People's Party and its main allies, drastically curtailing their ability to campaign during the election.

ODDLY enough

Cardboard traffic police!

STAR DESK

They work seven days a week regardless of weather condition, never go on breaks, don't take bribes and best of all, they require no pay. They are - wait for it - Bangalore's new life-like cardboard traffic policemen, and they're watching you!

Local authorities have come up with an ingenious idea to make drivers behave at the wheel.

Only three of them have been deployed so far, but results have been so encouraging that 10 more khaki-wearing fake cops will soon be rolled out to improve Bangalore's chaotic traffic.

Mind-reading headphones!

STAR DESK

Finding the right song to suit your mood can be pretty frustrating, but thanks to the new Mico mind-reading headphones from Japanese company Neurowear, you won't have to scroll through your playlist anymore. They'll just scan your brain and play the perfect song.

The Mico mind-reading system is made up of two parts: a pair of bulky headphones and an iPhone app.

The headphones come with a forehead sensor that analyzes the user's brainwaves to detect his mood, then connects to the Mico database via the iPhone application and selects the song that best fits his current state, from a number of neuro-tagged tunes.