

WORST TRAIN DISASTERS

An express train derailed in northern India early Sunday, killing over 120 people. Here is a list of the five deadliest rail disasters worldwide in the past two decades:

1995, AUG 20: In India, 305 are killed and 344 injured in a collision between two trains at Ferozabad, near Agra in the north.

2002, FEB 20: In Egypt, 361 people are killed in a train fire near the town of Al Ayatt south of Cairo.

2002, JUNE 24: In Tanzania, 288 die in a train accident near Dodoma.

2004, FEB 18: In Iran, 328 people are killed by an explosion on a train carrying sulphur, petrol and fertiliser in the northeast.

2004, DEC 26: In Sri Lanka, 1,300 are killed out of 1,500 passengers on a train between Colombo and Galle. It is struck by a giant tsunami which ravaged 11 countries on the shores of the Indian Ocean.

SOURCE: AFP



A Syrian man evacuates children from a school reportedly hit by rebel rocket fire in the Furqan neighbourhood of the government-held side of west Aleppo, yesterday. At least eight children were killed by rebel rocket fire that hit the school. Inset, A damaged classroom.

US IN TRANSITION

Trump set to unveil more cabinet picks Confirms he is considering Gen Mattis as Pentagon chief

AGENCIES

US President-elect Donald Trump meets a slate of potential cabinet members at his golf club yesterday, including Chris Christie, indicating he remains supportive of the New Jersey governor after booting him from the transition team.

The 70-year-old Republican billionaire promised reporters they would "hear some things" Sunday after a second marathon day of meetings at his New Jersey golf retreat, a 90-minute drive from Manhattan.

"Numerous patriots will be coming to Bedminster today as I continue to fill out the various positions necessary to MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" Trump wrote on Twitter.

Trump is building his new administration after his shock November 8 election win over Democrat Hillary Clinton, with an eye on his January 20 inauguration.

Others meeting Trump on Sunday include secretary of state contender and ex-New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, immigration hardliner Kris Kobach, Wilbur Ross, under consideration for commerce secretary, global investor David McCormick and conservative writer John Gray.

Trump and Vice President-elect Mike Pence met with 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney on Saturday for a "substantive and in-depth conversation about world affairs, national security and the future of America," a transition team statement read. Romney is reportedly in the running to be secretary of state.

If chosen, he would bring a more orthodox Republican worldview to foreign policy.



Donald Trump and general James Mattis

Other high-level candidates who trekked out to Trump's golf resort on Saturday included retired general James Mattis, a potential Pentagon chief, and Michelle Rhee, the controversial former head of schools in the US capital.

Trump is very interested in the idea of having Mattis serve in his administration, an official familiar with the transition process told CNN Saturday.

Trump yesterday confirmed he is considering Mattis for US defense secretary, a day after meeting with him in New Jersey.

The retired four-star general, who was known as "Mad Dog," was lauded for his leadership of Marines in the 2004 Battle of Fallujah in Iraq -- one of the bloodiest battles of the war. He also led a task force into southern Afghanistan in 2001.

He is an outspoken critic of the Iran nuclear deal.

So far, Trump has announced a handful of government nominations, including ultra-conservative Senator Jeff Sessions as attorney general, hawkish congressman Mike Pompeo as CIA director and retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn as his national security advisor.

Flynn's appointment does not require Senate approval. But that of Sessions as attorney general does, and he has baggage: racially charged comments he made in the 1980s that cost him a chance for a job for life as a federal judge.

'I cannot find my father' A bride-to-be's frantic search at Indian train mishap spot

HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

Her whole world came crashing down with the Indore-Patna express train that derailed early yesterday.

Several hours after the crash, 20-year-old bride-to-be Ruby Gupta was still looking for her father. Ruby, who fractured an arm as 14 coaches of the train were thrown off the rails, was on her way to Mau in Uttar Pradesh's Azamgarh for her wedding scheduled on December 1.

The eldest of the siblings, Ruby was travelling with sisters Archana (18), Khushi (16), brothers Abhishek and Vishal, and father Ram Prasad Gupta, who is missing. They boarded the train from Indore in Madhya Pradesh.

A family friend, Ram Parmesh Singh, was also with them. "I cannot find my father and I have been looking everywhere for him. Some people told me to look in hospitals and in morgues but I am clueless as to what to do.



I have a fractured arm and my sisters have also sustained injuries," she said.

"I do not know if my marriage will go as planned or not. I want to find my father now. I have tried calling everywhere, but I do not know what to do now."

Her clothes and jewellery are also missing.

In another tragic development, two children were pulled out alive from an overturned coach of the Indore-Patna Express.

The two boys, aged six and seven, were pulled out from the S3 bogie of the train, police officials said.

A woman, suspected to be the mother of the boys, was found dead near them, police said.

Emergency workers raced to find any more survivors in the mangled wreckage of the Indian train that derailed overnight, killing at least 116 people, in the worst disaster to hit the country's ageing rail network in recent years.

Aleppo blitz kills 300

Rebel attack on school kills 8; UN envoy pushes truce efforts

AGENCIES

A renewed blitz on Syria's war-ravaged eastern Aleppo has killed almost 300 people in five days -- including children as the UN's envoy struggled to push peace efforts in Damascus.

Fresh fighting shook Aleppo yesterday with a rebel attack killing at least eight children at a school.

The envoy, Staffan de Mistura, met with Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in Damascus for talks on the escalating violence in Aleppo, but was rebuffed on a truce proposal that would allow the opposition to administer the city's rebel-held east.

International concern has been growing over the fighting, after Damascus launched a ferocious assault in Aleppo last Tuesday, using air strikes, barrel bombs and artillery fire in a bid to recapture the east of the battered city.

On Sunday, rebels retaliated with a barrage of rockets into the government-held west of the city, killing at least eight children at a school in the Furqan neighbourhood, Syrian state media said.

State television showed bloodied, weeping children being treated in a local hospital, and an AFP journalist saw students being rushed from the school and comforted in the aftermath of the attack.

The attacks have also obliterated desperately needed hospitals, worsening an already dire humanitarian situation. On Saturday, the Syrian American Medical Society told CNN that not a single hospital in eastern Aleppo was operating at full capacity.

At least 289 people were killed between Tuesday and Saturday last week, said the Syrian Civil Defense -- a volunteer rescue group also known as the White Helmets. The deaths came as the Syrian regime resumed airstrikes on the war-ravaged area after a three-week lull.

The death toll is likely to climb, as the White Helmets said another 950 people were injured. And dozens remain missing in what the rescue group described as "nonstop attacks."

Saturday saw intense bombardment, with 68 people killed, according to the Aleppo Media Center activist group. Strikes continued Sunday, but at a lower intensity, activists said.

Syria's grinding five-year conflict has devastated Aleppo, divided between government-controlled areas in the west and rebel positions in the east.

The Syrian regime, backed by Russian air power, has decimated much of eastern Aleppo with aerial bombardments in recent months, and has threatened a ground offensive to seize control of the area.

Aid agencies have struggled to get aid into the zone. Government forces have besieged the area since July, essentially cutting the area off from the rest of the world -- a stranglehold tactic that the Syrian regime is infamous for. As a result, food, medicine and fuel supplies are desperately low.

More than 300,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began with anti-government protests in March 2011. Successive international attempts to find a peaceful resolution to the war have failed.

S Korea president 'colluded with aide in graft scandal'

AFP, Seoul

South Korean prosecutors yesterday said that President Park Geun-Hye colluded with her close confidante in a corruption and influence-peddling scandal that has sparked massive nationwide protests and calls for her impeachment.

Park's longtime friend Choi Soon-Sil was charged with coercion and abuse of power yesterday, as was one of the president's former aides.

Another presidential aide was charged with leaking confidential state documents.

"The president played a collusive role in a considerable portion of the criminal activities involving the (three) people," said Lee Young-Ryeol, a Seoul prosecutor who is leading a probe into the scandal.

Choi, 60, has been accused of using her personal ties to Park to meddle in state



affairs and of coercing local firms to "donate" more than \$60 million to dubious non-profit foundations. She allegedly then used some of the funds for personal gain.

Park faces allegations that she helped Choi extract money from the firms and that she ordered her aides to leak state documents to Choi, who has no official title or security clearance.

Under the constitution a sitting president cannot be charged with a criminal offence except insurrection or treason. But she can still be probed by prosecutors and possibly charged after leaving office.

Lee acknowledged that prosecutors could not formally charge Park at present but vowed to continue to investigate her.

Prosecutors had previously described the conservative leader as a witness to Choi's crimes but changed her status to that of a criminal suspect, said a senior prosecutor at the investigative team.



Women mourn during the funeral of a suspected militant, who according to local media was killed in an encounter with the Indian armed forces in Pulwama district on Saturday afternoon, in Kakapora village, south of Kashmir, yesterday. Dozens of people have been killed in clashes with forces in Indian Kashmir since July 8.

US-China ties at 'hinge moment'

Says Xi, Obama makes urges patience with Trump at Apec summit

AFP, Lima

Presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping met for the final time Saturday, with the Chinese leader warning the period after Donald Trump's election is a "hinge moment" in relations between the two powers.

Without referring to Trump directly, Xi spoke of his hope for a "smooth transition" in a relationship that Obama described as "the most consequential in the world."

The two men were meeting in Lima, Peru on the margins of an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit.

During a vitriol-filled election campaign Trump frequently took a combative stance against China, blaming Beijing for "inventing" climate change and rigging the rules of trade.

For much of Obama's presidency, China and the United States have slowly improved cooperation and tried to limit the fallout from disputes, all while vying for influence in the Asia-Pacific.



Xi -- who the White House sees as perhaps the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping or even Mao Zedong -- said he wanted to see cooperation continue.

Obama said he wanted to "take this opportunity to note our work together to build a more durable and productive set of bilateral ties."

Earlier, Obama made a strident case for democracy Saturday and urged world leaders to give his successor a chance.

Speaking to young Latin Americans in Lima, Peru, Obama argued that democracy and development go hand-in-hand, and that authoritarian governments ultimately fail.

He faces a barrage of questions about Trump, whose campaign promises threaten to upend decades-long US commitments to Nato and defense obligations in Asia.

Trump has also opposed a 12-nation Pacific trade deal and backed by key allies like Japan.

"It will be important for everybody around the world to not make immediate judgments but to give this president elect a chance."

Three minutes' embrace

AFP, San Ysidro

For 20 years, Laura Avila had yearned to hug her mother again. On Saturday, tears streaming down her face, the 35-year-old had her wish finally come true -- if only for three minutes.

At 12:27 pm, she hesitantly walked toward a heavy metal gate on the US-Mexico border in San Diego that a US Border Patrol agent had opened only minutes before, burying her face in her mother's embrace.

Avila and her 11-year-old daughter were among six families chosen to take part in an event organized by the migrant advocacy group Border Angels in cooperation with US authorities on the occasion of United Nations Children's Day.

One by one, each family was escorted to the opening in the steel fence separating the San Diego suburb of San Ysidro from Tijuana, in Mexico, and for three minutes -- under the watchful eye of border agents and a scrum of journalists -- hugged and kissed their loved ones who had waited on the other side.

Saturday's event -- the fourth organized by Border Angels since 2013 -- took on added meaning for those attending, coming on the heels of the election of Donald Trump as president.

Trump vowed during the presidential campaign to build a wall along the US-Mexico border and to deport millions of illegal immigrants from the country.

Whether Trump pushes ahead with his harsh immigration proposals was clearly on everyone's mind Saturday as the families hugged and cried, with many wondering if it would be the last such event to take place.

"I am terrified," said Luis Hernandez, 25, who hadn't seen his father in five years.

His parents slipped into the United States through the border with Tijuana when he was five years old and his father was arrested and deported five years ago. But Hernandez, like several of those at the event Saturday, was allowed to stay in the US thanks to President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

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NEWS IN brief

Merkel to seek fourth term

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday she would seek a fourth term in elections next year to defend democratic principles in the face of looming threats at home and abroad. Predicting her toughest campaign to date, Merkel said the forces of populism as well as the uncertainty created by poll triumphs for Brexit and Donald Trump meant she had a "duty to serve my country".

Yemen truce takes hold

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen saw a rare respite from fighting yesterday, the second day of a 48-hour ceasefire that followed a US push to halt a conflict that has wrought devastation and killed thousands. The ceasefire comes after US Secretary of State John Kerry met rebel representatives in Oman and urged the internationally recognised government of Yemen to come on board.

French right holds presidential primary

AFP, Paris

French voters went to the polls yesterday for the first round of a US-style primary to choose a rightwing candidate for next year's presidential elections, with former president Nicolas Sarkozy and ex-prime minister Alain Juppe facing a late challenge from an outsider. A last-minute surge in the opinion polls by Francois Fillon, who was PM under Sarkozy, showed he was in contention to grab one of the top two spots for next Sunday's runoff.