

SOUTH ASIA FLOODS

Death toll hits 700

AFP, New Delhi

The confirmed death toll passed 700 and more than a million were driven from their homes as large swathes of South Asia reeled under monsoon floods, officials said yesterday.

At least 100 deaths were reported overnight across India and Bangladesh following the latest in a series of deluges since August 10, as the annual monsoon hit the north and east of the region.

Anirudh Kumar, a top disaster management official in India's eastern state of Bihar, said 53 bodies were recovered as water levels started to recede in some areas.

"The total death toll stands at 205," Kumar told AFP.

Nearly 400,000 people were staying in state-run shelters, with an estimated 10 million affected by the deluge, the worst since 2008 when nearly 300 people were killed.

Some 10,000 emergency workers and soldiers were supporting local officials in relief and rescue operations. In neighbouring Uttar Pradesh state 69 deaths were reported as two million residents remain affected by the floods.

Nearly half of the 75 districts in the state have been hit by the floods and authorities are seeking military help to evacuate people in at least two districts.

Both the states border Nepal, which was also hit by landslides and floods that killed 135 people. Another 30 are reported to be missing.

At least 20 percent of the 28 million people in the landlocked Himalayan state are affected by what the United Nations has called the worst floods to hit the country for 15 years.

In India's eastern state of West Bengal and in the remote northeastern state of Assam, 122 people have died with nearly three million affected by floods.



Anti-racist protesters march in Boston on Saturday. Thousands of anti-racism demonstrators flooded the streets of Boston, dwarfing a gathering of white nationalists in the city and triggering scuffles with police but avoiding the serious violence that marred a similar event a week earlier in Virginia.

OFFENSIVE AGAINST IS

Iraq begins battle to retake Tal Afar

AFP, Tal Afar Airbase

Iraqi forces yesterday pounded the Islamic State group in Tal Afar, one of its last bastions in the country, in a new assault just weeks after ousting IS from second city Mosul.

Once a key IS supply hub between Mosul -- around 70 kilometres (45 miles) further east -- and the Syrian border, Tal Afar is the last major population centre in northern Iraq under jihadist control.

Weeks after recapturing Mosul in a major blow to the jihadists, convoys of Iraqi forces around Tal Afar began pounding IS positions from three sides at dawn Sunday.

An AFP correspondent reported mortar fire in the mostly desert area dotted by some farmland, with columns of smoke billowing skywards.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the offensive in a pre-dawn televised speech.

Several hours after the battle began, the federal police said it had retaken the village of Al-Abra Al-Sghira west of Tal Afar.

The US-led coalition fighting IS in Iraq and Syria welcomed the start of the offensive and pledged support to Iraqi forces involved.

IS in June 2014 overran Tal Afar, a Shia enclave in the predominantly Sunni province of Nineveh, on the road between Mosul and Syria.

Authorities have accused the approximately 1,000 jihadists in the city of using civilians as human shields during Iraqi and coalition air strikes earlier this week in preparation for the ground assault.

US 'pouring gasoline on fire' Warns North Korea ahead of Joint Military Exercises with South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday warned that the United States will be "pouring gasoline on fire" by conducting an annual war game in the South next week amid heightened tensions between Pyongyang and Washington.

Combative rhetoric between the nations spiked after Pyongyang tested two intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) last month that appeared to bring much of the US within range, sparking an intense warning by President Donald Trump that Washington could rain "fire and fury" on the North.

Pyongyang then threatened to fire a salvo of missiles towards the US territory of Guam -- a plan that leader Kim Jong-Un last week delayed, but warned could go ahead depending on Washington's next move.

Amid the fiery volley of threats, Seoul and Washington will begin the "Ulchi Freedom Guardian" (UFG) joint military exercises today involving tens of thousands of troops that Pyongyang views as a highly provocative rehearsal for invasion.

"The joint exercise is the most explicit expression of hostility against us, and no one can guarantee that the exercise won't evolve into actual fighting," said an editorial carried by the North's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper.

"The Ulchi Freedom Guardian joint military exercises will be like pouring gasoline on fire and worsen the state of

the peninsula," the paper said.

Warning of an "uncontrollable phase of a nuclear war" on the peninsula, it added: "If the United States is lost in a fantasy that war on the peninsula is at somebody else's doorstep far away from them across the Pacific, it is far more mistaken than ever."

Seoul and Washington have said the largely computer-simulated UFG exercise, which dates back to 1976, will go ahead as planned, but did not comment on whether the drills would be scaled back in an effort to ease tensions.

Around 17,500 US troops will participate in this year's drills -- a cutback from last year -- according to numbers provided by Seoul's defence ministry.

But South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported the allies were mulling scrapping an initial plan to bring in two aircraft carriers to the peninsula to take part in the drill.

South Korea's top military officer said Sunday that the current security situation on the peninsula was "more serious than at any other time" amid the North's growing nuclear and missile threats, and warned Pyongyang of merciless retaliation against any attack.

"If the enemy provokes, (our military) will retaliate resolutely and strongly to make it regret bitterly," said General Jeong Kyeong-Doo, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in his inauguration speech.



Syria war still not won but West's plots foiled: Assad

Injuries as rocket hits near Damascus business fair

AGENCIES

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday said that while his country had foiled Western designs to topple him, his army had not won defeating insurgents and the fight was continuing.

In a televised address, Assad said that even though there were signs of victory after six-and-a-half years of civil war, the "battle continues, and where we go later and it becomes possible to talk about victory...that's a different matter".

He did not elaborate on that point.

However, he said the assistance extended by stalwart allies Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement had enabled the army to make battlefield gains and reduce the burden of war.

"Their direct support - politically, economically and militarily - has made possible advances on the battlefield and reduced the losses and burdens of war," Assad added.

He said his country welcomed Russian-brokered, regional ceasefire deals that Moscow is seeking to extend elsewhere in Syria as these

would end bloodshed and bring an end to insurgency and pardoning of rebels.

"We have an interest in the success of this initiative."

However, Assad condemned US-inspired "safe zones" which President Donald Trump earlier this year said he hoped to achieve with Russia, saying such a plan would only "give cover to terrorists."

Meanwhile, rocket fire injured several people yesterday near the entrance to the Damascus International Fair, a key business gathering being held for the first time in five years, Syrian television said.

State television, citing its reporters on the scene, said the rocket hit near the entrance of the exhibition complex where the business fair opened this week.

The breaking news alert gave no details on the number of injured or the source of the rocket fire, and there was no immediate mention of the incident on state news agency SANA.



Cops uncover 'bomb factory'

Barcelona mourns as suspect is still on the run

AFP, Barcelona

Spanish police yesterday said they had uncovered a cache of 120 gas canisters at a house believed to be the bomb-making factory of suspects in terror attacks that claimed 14 lives, as Barcelona mourned victims of the rampage.

Meanwhile Russia yesterday said that a stabbing which injured seven people and was claimed by the Islamic State group is being probed by top investigators in Moscow.

And Finland observed a minute of silence yesterday for the victims of a stabbing attack that left two people dead in what is being investigated as the country's first-ever terror attack. Another eight people were wounded in the stabbing spree on Friday in the southwestern port city of Turku.

The suspected jihadists had been preparing bombs for "one or more attacks in Barcelona", regional police chief Josep Lluís Trapero told reporters, revealing that traces of TATP explosive had also been found.

But the suspects accidentally detonated an explosive at the house on the

eve of Thursday's attack in Barcelona -- an error that likely forced them to modify their plans.

Instead, they used a vehicle to smash into crowds on Barcelona's Las Ramblas boulevard as it was thronged with tourists, killing 13 people and injuring about 100.

Several hours later, a similar attack

TERROR ATTACK IN EUROPE

Russia steps up probe into attack claimed by IS

Finland marks minute of silence for stabbing victims

in the seaside town of Cambrils left one woman dead. Police shot and killed the five attackers in Cambrils, some of whom were wearing fake explosive belts and carrying knives.

The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for the attacks, believed to be its first in Spain.

Police are hunting a Moroccan man suspected of driving the van used in

Barcelona, and warn that he could be at large outside Spain.

Three days after the attack that plunged the country into deep grief, locals and tourists turned out in force on Sunday to mourn victims at Barcelona's Sagrada Familia basilica.

King Felipe, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and Catalonia's president, Carles Puigdemont, led the 90-minute ceremony, while heavily-armed police stood guard outside and snipers deployed on rooftops.

Traces of triacetone triperoxide (TATP) -- a homemade explosive that is an IS hallmark -- were also found at the bomb factory in Alcanar, about 200 kilometres south of Barcelona, where the gas canisters were uncovered.

Investigators said they believe the terror cell comprised at least 12 men, some of them teenagers.

An imam, Abdelbaki Es Satty, was among the suspects, police confirmed.

Investigators are seeking to unravel the role of the imam, who is believed to have radicalised many of the youths in a small town called Ripoll at the foot of the Pyrenees.



People gather at an impromptu memorial where a van crashed into pedestrians at Las Ramblas in Barcelona, Spain, yesterday.

PURSUIT FOR LONGER LIFE

Teenagers' blood being sold for £6,200 a shot

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Transfusions of teenage blood are being sold for £6,200 a shot, with a US company claiming it may have anti-ageing properties.

More than 100 people have undergone a clinical trial at Ambrosia, a start-up in San Francisco founded by Stanford-trained doctor Jesse Karmazin, in which they are injected with two and a half litres of plasma, the liquid portion of blood which remains after other cells are removed.

The early results have been encouraging, with Karmazin telling The Sunday Times the treatment is "like plastic surgery from the inside out."

"It could help improve things such as appearance or diabetes or heart function or memory," he said. "These are all the aspects of ageing that have a common cause."

"I'm not really in the camp of saying this will provide immortality but I think it comes pretty close, essentially."

However, researchers have warned the procedure is unproven and the trial is unlikely to provide much in the way of clinical evidence to support Karmazin's claims.

Iran's top priority is to save nuke deal from US: Rouhani

AFP, Tehran

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday said the top foreign policy priority for his new government was to protect the nuclear deal from being torn up by the United States.

"The most important job of our foreign minister is first to stand behind the JCPOA, and not to allow the US and other enemies to succeed," Rouhani told parliament, using the technical name for the 2015 deal that eased sanctions in exchange for curbs to Iran's nuclear programme.

"Standing up for the JCPOA means standing up to Iran's enemies," he said on the last day of debates over his cabinet selections.

Rouhani indicated a week ago that Iran was ready to walk out on the nuclear deal if the United States continued to apply fresh sanctions.

US President Donald Trump repeatedly threatened to tear up the deal during his campaign, and it has come under mounting pressure after Tehran carried out missile

tests and Washington imposed new sanctions -- with each accusing the other of violating the spirit of the agreement.

But Rouhani has insisted it remains Iran's preferred way forward, not least to help rebuild the struggling economy and create jobs.

"The second responsibility of the foreign ministry... is to get involved in economic activities. It should help attract foreign investment and technology," Rouhani said, adding that Iran needed \$200 billion in investments for the oil and gas sector alone.

Parliament approved 16 of his 17 cabinet picks, rejecting his suggested minister of energy, a reformist named Habibollah Bitaraf.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was the charismatic face of Iran's nuclear negotiations, retained his position.

Rouhani, a political moderate, worked hard behind the scenes to secure support for his choices, including from the supreme leader and the military.



INDIAN TRAIN CRASH

Probe launched

REUTERS, New Delhi

India yesterday began investigating a train crash in which 23 people were killed, the fourth major accident over the past year on the world's fourth biggest rail network.

The cause of the derailment about 130 km north of the capital New Delhi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, was not known, said Northern Railways spokesman Neeraj Sharma. Sharma said rescue operations had ended.

Thirteen coaches of the train came off the tracks as it was heading to the Hindu holy city of Haridwar, police said.

The cause of the accident was not known but a member of the railway board told reporters there was information that the derailment happened because of some repair work on the track.

Comedy legend Jerry Lewis dies

AFP, Washington

Veteran American entertainer Jerry Lewis, whose goofy brand of physical comedy endeared him to millions in a career spanning six decades, died yesterday aged 91.

One of the most popular comic actors of the 1950s and '60s, Lewis perfected the role of the quirky clown in slapstick comedies like "The Nutty Professor" but also won acclaim as a writer, actor and philanthropist.

"Very sadly Jerry Lewis has passed," his agent Jeff Wijtas told AFP. Variety reported that the comic legend died in Las Vegas early in the morning.

Born Joseph Levitch in Newark, New Jersey, Lewis first took centre stage at the tender age of five, when he performed "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"

Honoured with accolades at home and abroad, including a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, he became known as much for his tireless efforts to promote awareness of Muscular Dystrophy as for his unique brand of physical comedy.

Over the course of 45 years, he raised some \$2.45 billion for combating the disease with an annual television event.

His box office grosses, spanning nearly 50 years, total \$800 million -- an impressive figure since movie tickets cost no more than 50 cents during the height of his popularity.

