

Flood-hit China braces for typhoon

AFP, Beijing

China shut down ports and railways yesterday as it braced for Typhoon In-Fa as parts of the country struggled to recover from devastating floods earlier this week.

In-Fa is forecast to make landfall late Sunday in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang near Shanghai, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

Chinese authorities have issued a level III alert -- the third-highest -- for the storm, while more than 100 trains travelling through the region have been cancelled, according to China Railway.

Shanghai authorities closed some public parks and museums and warned residents to "stop large-scale outdoor gatherings" and to stay indoors.

Meanwhile, all container ship docks were shut down from Yangshan Port south of Shanghai and 150 vessels including passenger ships and cargo vessels were evacuated from the area.

In central China's Henan province, where historic floods this week have now killed at least 58 people, authorities are gradually clearing and reopening roads blocked with vehicles and debris.

Millions have been affected by the floods, with some trapped without fresh food or water for days and others lifted to safety in excavator buckets.

More than 495,000 people have been evacuated, according to the Henan government, with the flooding causing billions of dollars in losses.

Torrential downpours dumped a year's rain in just three days this week on the hardest-hit city of Zhengzhou, where at least a dozen people died inside a subway train during Tuesday's rush hour after floodwaters trapped passengers in their carriages.

State media warned that In-Fa could bring more torrential downpours to parts of the province in the coming days.

China has suffered an annual flood season for millennia, but the record rainfall in Henan has prompted questions about how China's cities could be better prepared for freak weather events, which experts say are happening with increased frequency and intensity due to climate change.



Flooded industrial buildings are seen following heavy rainfall in Xinxiang, Henan province, China, yesterday. Inset, A villager cries as she asks rescue workers to help her family while standing in floodwaters following heavy rainfall at a village in Xinxiang.

PHOTO: REUTERS

BID TO STEM TALIBAN OFFENSIVE IN AFGHANISTAN

Night curfew imposed in 31 provinces

Biden assures Ghani of continued US support, authorizes \$100m for resettling refugees

AGENCIES

Afghan authorities yesterday imposed a night-time curfew across 31 of the country's 34 provinces to curb surging violence unleashed by a sweeping Taliban offensive in recent months, the interior ministry said.

The widespread Taliban offensive has seen the insurgents capture key border crossings, dozens of districts and encircle several provincial capitals since early May.

"To curb violence and limit the Taliban movements a night curfew has been imposed in 31 provinces across the country," except in Kabul, Panjshir and Nangarhar, the interior ministry said in a statement.

The curfew will be effective between 10:00 pm and 4:00 am local time, Ahmad Zia Zia, deputy interior ministry spokesman said in a separate audio statement to reporters.

With the withdrawal of American-led foreign forces all but complete, the resurgent Taliban now controls about half of Afghanistan's roughly 400 districts.

After a brief lull in violence during this week's Muslim holidays of Eid al-Adha, fighting continued again with the authorities claiming to have killed more than 260 Taliban fighters in the past 24 hours across several provinces.

Both the authorities and the Taliban exaggerate their claims which cannot be independently verified.

As the fighting raged in recent weeks, the US military was forced to carry out air strikes "to support" Afghan troops to repel Taliban offensives even as its overall withdrawal continues, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.

Experts say a lack of regular US air support since May to Afghan forces on the ground is a key factor in government troops losing lot of territory to the Taliban.

Late on Friday, the Taliban warned the US military against carrying out air strikes.

"It is a clear violation of the signed agreement that will have consequences," the Taliban said in a statement, referring to a landmark deal between Washington and the insurgents last year that paved

the way for the withdrawal of foreign forces.

The Taliban also warned the Afghan government against launching any offensive.

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden assured President Ashraf Ghani of US diplomatic and humanitarian support on Friday.

In a phone call, Biden and Ghani "agreed that the Taliban's current offensive is in direct contradiction to the movement's claim to support a negotiated settlement of the conflict," a White House statement said.

Biden has set a formal end to the US military mission in Afghanistan for Aug. 31 as he looks to disengage from a conflict that started after al Qaeda attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

The United States is also preparing to begin evacuating thousands of Afghan applicants for special immigration visas (SIVs) who risk retaliation from Taliban insurgents because they worked for the US government.

Biden on Friday authorized up to \$100 million from an emergency fund to meet "unexpected urgent" refugee needs stemming from the situation, the White House said.

Blinken to visit India with vaccines, China in focus

REUTERS, Washington

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel next week to India, an important partner in US efforts to counter China and in vaccine diplomacy that is hobbled by its own Covid-19 crisis.

It will be Blinken's first visit to the world's largest democracy as President Joe Biden's secretary of state and he will meet on Wednesday with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

Blinken will also visit Kuwait at the end of his July 26-29 trip.

Washington sees India as helping in US efforts to stand up to China's increasingly assertive behavior in Asia and beyond. Blinken's trip will follow a visit by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to China and coincide with one to Southeast Asia by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

On Blinken's agenda will be "Indo-Pacific engagement, shared regional security



interests, shared democratic values, and addressing the climate crisis" as well as the response to the coronavirus pandemic, the State Department said.

Blinken is also likely to discuss plans for an in-person summit of the so-called Quad.

The grouping of India, Japan, Australia and the United States is seen as a counter to China's rising influence.

The meeting - which diplomats and others said could coincide with the late-September UN General Assembly, pandemic travel permitting - is expected to focus on ways to develop regional infrastructure in the face of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Blinken would also raise India's human rights record during the trip, said Dean Thompson, the State Department's acting assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs.

Violent protests mar funeral of slain Haiti president

REUTERS, Cap-Haitien

Haiti bid a rowdy farewell to assassinated president Jovenel Moise on Friday as his funeral was roiled by nearby gunfire and protests, prompting a high-level US delegation to leave abruptly and other dignitaries to duck into vehicles for safety.

The state funeral in the northern city of Cap-Haitien was intended to foster national unity, but the unrest reflected deep divisions over the July 7 atrocity, in which suspected foreign gunmen walked apparently unchallenged into the Moises' residence and shot the president multiple times, also injuring his wife.

Acrid smoke from piles of burning tires and gutted autos blocking roads outside the compound where the ceremony was held billowed into the service, depositing black ash onto mourners.

Delivering an emotive address that switched between French and Creole, Moise's widow Martine closed the ceremony with a call for justice for her husband, rounding on his critics and pledging to continue his efforts to build a fairer Haiti.



"The struggle isn't over yet," she said, her face nearly hidden under a wide-brimmed black hat, and her bandaged right arm in a sling. "He has already shown us the way. And he will be with us until we get there, even though the journey is long."

Few answers have emerged about who planned the killing, or why.

There were no immediate reports of injuries among protesters or mourners at the funeral.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Washington was "deeply concerned" about the situation in Haiti as he announced the US delegation had returned home safely. US President Joe Biden's ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, led the American delegation.

Some saw in the assassination the continuing hand of foreign powers in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, which was the first state in Latin America and the Caribbean to become independent from Europe at the start of the 19th century.

Haitian officials say the attack was carried out by a group that included 26 Colombian former soldiers, at least six of whom had previously received US military training.

Bali running out of oxygen as government ponders curbs

REUTERS, Jakarta

The Indonesian island of Bali is running out of oxygen for its Covid-19 patients as infections surge, the chief of its health agency said, as Southeast Asia's biggest country struggles with the region's worst Covid epidemic.

Bali, famous for its tourist beaches and temples, along with the main island of Java and 15 other regions are under tight coronavirus restrictions, due to expire on Sunday. The government is debating whether to extend them or not.

"We've had an oxygen shortage since July 14 and it's getting critical by the day because of a surge in new cases," Ketut Suarjaya, the head of Bali's health agency, said as quoted by Antara state news agency as saying on Friday.

"There's an oxygen crisis in Bali." Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, has had more than 3 million coronavirus infections and 80,598 deaths according to official data. The spread, driven by the Delta variant, has shown no sign of slowing.

Research organisation Our World in Data said the country had a death rate three times higher than the global average.

The debate over coronavirus restrictions has pitted health experts, who say it is premature to ease curbs during the surge of infections, against employer groups that have warned of mass layoffs unless the curbs are relaxed.

Suarjaya said patients in Bali needed 113.3 tonnes of oxygen on Thursday, while hospitals only had 40.5 tonnes. Oxygen shortages have also been seen on Java.



A helicopter is being filled up with water from a tank as a wildfire burns near the village of Spathovouni, near Corinth, Greece, on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

SpaceX lands Nasa contract for mission to Jupiter's moon Europa

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Elon Musk's private rocket company SpaceX was awarded a \$178 million launch services contract for Nasa's first mission focusing on Jupiter's icy moon Europa and whether it may host conditions suitable for life, the space agency said on Friday.

The Europa Clipper mission is due for blastoff in October 2024 on a Falcon Heavy rocket owned by Musk's company, Space Exploration Technologies Corp, from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida, Nasa said in a statement posted online.

The contract marked Nasa's latest vote of confidence in the Hawthorne, California-based company, which has carried several cargo payloads and astronauts to the International Space

Station for Nasa in recent years.

In April, SpaceX was awarded a \$2.9 billion contract to build the lunar lander spacecraft for the planned Artemis program that would carry Nasa astronauts back to the moon for the first time since 1972.

But that contract was suspended after two rival space companies, Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin and defense contractor Dynetics Inc, protested against the SpaceX selection.

The company's partly reusable 23-story Falcon Heavy, currently the most powerful operational space launch vehicle in the world, flew its first commercial payload into orbit in 2019.

Nasa did not say what other companies may have bid on the Europa Clipper launch contract. The probe is to conduct a detailed

survey of the ice-covered Jovian satellite, which is a bit smaller than Earth's moon and is a leading candidate in the search for life elsewhere in the solar system.

A bend in Europa's magnetic field observed by Nasa's Galileo spacecraft in 1997 appeared to have been caused by a geyser gushing through the moon's frozen crust from a vast subsurface ocean, researchers concluded in 2018. Those findings supported other evidence of Europa plumes.

Among the Clipper mission's objectives are to produce high-resolution images of Europa's surface, determine its composition, look for signs of geologic activity, measure the thickness of its icy shell and determine the depth and salinity of its ocean, Nasa said.



Relatives and the mother of Palestinian Mohammed Al-Tamimi, who was killed by Israeli forces during clash on Friday, mourning during his funeral in Deir Nidham in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS