

Philippines floods kills 11 19 remain missing

AFP, Manila

Christmas Day floods in the Philippines forced the evacuation of nearly 46,000 people from their homes, civil defence officials said yesterday.

Eleven people were killed and 19 others were missing after a week's worth of heavy seasonal rain in the southern and eastern regions of the country, they said, updating earlier official figures.

The flooding hit the south on Sunday, with the disaster dampening celebrations on the mainly Catholic nation's most important holiday.

Rivers overflowed, swamping rural villages and highways as well as the cities of Ozamiz and Oroquieta, governor Henry Oaminal for the province of Misamis Occidental said on government radio.

"The heart of the city was flooded including the public market. Power was cut off and there was no (telephone) signal," he said, referring to Oroquieta, the provincial capital with 72,000 residents.

"We've had floods before, but these are the worst rainfall and water flow levels we have ever had," he added.

"The waters rose above the chest in some areas, but today the rains have ceased," civil defence worker Robinson Lacre told AFP by phone from Gingoog city, which accounted for 33,000 of the 45,700 people evacuated from their homes.

Seven deaths – mostly from drowning – were reported in Clarin and the nearby southern towns of Jimenez and Tudela.

The coastguard also said strong winds and big waves sank a fishing boat on Christmas Day off the coast of the central island of Leyte. Two crew members were killed, while six others were rescued. Two others, including a baby girl, drowned in the eastern towns of Libmanan and Tinambac after they were hit by floods.

Nineteen people remain missing, official said.



Demonstrators hold portraits of victims of last Friday's shooting in Paris, and those of La Fayette street murders in 2013, as they take part in a march to pay tribute to them and in solidarity with the Kurdish community in Paris, yesterday. A 69-year-old French man suspected of killing three Kurds and injuring three others in a Paris shooting has confessed to a "pathological" hatred for foreigners, Paris prosecutor Laure Beccuaud said on December 25, 2022. The suspect spent nearly a day in a psychiatric facility on December 25, before being returned to police custody on the same day.

PHOTO: AFP

Taiwan reports China's largest air incursion

REUTERS, Taipei

Seventy-one Chinese air force aircraft including fighter jets and drones entered Taiwan's air defence identification zone in the past 24 hours, the island's government said yesterday, the largest reported incursion to date.

Of the aircraft, 43 also crossed the Taiwan Strait's median line, an unofficial buffer between the two sides that lies within the defence zone, Taiwan's Defence Ministry said in a report, as Beijing continues military activities close to the Chinese-claimed island.

Taiwan's official Central News Agency said it was the largest Chinese air force incursion to date, although there was no sense of alarm on the island, which has witnessed a steady increase in Chinese pressure in recent years.

China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory, said it had conducted "strike drills" in the sea and airspace around Taiwan on Sunday in response to what it said was provocation from the democratically governed island and the United States.

During the latest incursion, several Chinese planes, mostly fighter jets, briefly crossed the median line in the sensitive Taiwan Strait before returning to China, according to a map provided by Taiwan's defence ministry. Seven Chinese navy ships were also detected near Taiwan, the ministry said.

Nepal new govt seeks to balance ties with India, China

Economic growth, taming inflation are key priorities

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's new government, led by the former Maoist rebel chief, will try to balance ties with its immediate neighbours China and India as it seeks economic growth in one of the world's poorest countries, officials of the ruling coalition told Reuters.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who still goes by his nom de guerre Prachanda, unexpectedly became prime minister for a third time on Sunday after leaving his previous coalition and securing the support of the opposition Communist Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) party and five other smaller groups. Last month's election had returned a hung parliament.

The UML leader and former prime minister, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, is believed to be pro-China.

Nepal is one of several South Asian countries where India and China both seek influence. India has long considered Hindu-majority Nepal, a Himalayan country of 30 million, as a natural ally based on their close historical ties and long open border.

"We'll maintain relationships of equi-

proximity with both our neighbours," Narayan Kaji Shrestha, a senior member of Prachanda's Maoist Centre party, told Reuters. Shrestha was later named as a deputy prime minister.

"We must immediately focus on containing inflation, maintain reserves, raise capital expenses, narrow the trade deficit and lower interest rates."

Prachanda also named six other ministers and gave the key finance portfolio to Bishnu Prasad Paudel of the UML party. Paudel has been finance minister twice before.

Another key appointment is that of Rabi Lamichhane, a television talk show host, to the home (interior) ministry.

Prachanda kept the foreign ministry for himself.

Beijing and New Delhi have poured billions of dollars in aid and investment into Nepal, which is rich in potential to generate hydroelectric power.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, which is Nepal's biggest trade and economic partner, was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate Prachanda on his appointment.

"The unique relationship between India & Nepal is based on deep cultural connect & warm people-to-people ties," Modi said on Twitter. "I look forward to working together with you to further strengthen this friendship."

A Chinese embassy spokesperson in Kathmandu, in a Twitter post, also congratulated Prachanda.

Analysts said Nepal's \$40 billion economy, emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, needed the immediate attention of the new government which must regain the trust of investors and businesses as well as boost production.

Inflation is at more than 8 percent, the highest in six years. Nepal also faces dwindling foreign exchange reserves, with an increasing dependence on imports of basic goods.

Former finance minister Yuba Raj Khatiwada, who worked under Oli, said Prachanda must focus on boosting manufacturing products such as cement for export, and also agriculture to substitute imports.

Prachanda, who led a decade-long Maoist insurgency against Nepal's then monarchy from 1996, gave up communist dogma and embraced liberalisation after joining the mainstream under a peace deal in 2006. The conflict caused 17,000 deaths.

Nepal has had 10 government changes since the 239-year-old monarchy was abolished in 2008.



Final verdicts in Suu Kyi junta trial set for Friday

AFP, Yangon

A Myanmar junta court will give its verdicts on five remaining charges in the 18-month trial of jailed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Friday, a legal source told AFP.

Suu Kyi has been a prisoner since the military toppled her government in February last year, ending the Southeast Asian nation's brief period of democracy.

The Nobel laureate, 77, has already been found guilty on 14 charges ranging from corruption to illegally importing walkie-talkies and breaching the official secrets act, and has been jailed for 26 years.

"Both sides gave final arguments today at court," said a source with knowledge of the case yesterday.

"There will be a verdict on coming Friday (30th) December."

Rights groups have slammed the trial as a sham, and on Wednesday the UN Security Council called on the junta to release Suu Kyi in its first resolution on the situation in Myanmar since the

coup.

The remaining five corruption charges Suu Kyi faces relate to the rental of a helicopter for a government minister, a case in which she had allegedly not followed regulations and caused "a loss to the state". Each carries a maximum jail term of 15 years. In previous corruption cases, the court has generally sentenced Suu Kyi to three years per charge.

Analysts say the junta may allow Suu Kyi to serve some of her sentence under house arrest while it prepares for elections it has said it will hold next year.



Commuters ride a subway train during the morning rush hour amid the Covid-19 outbreak, in Beijing, China, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

COVID WAVE IN CHINA

Xi urges steps to 'protect' lives

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday urged officials to take steps to protect lives in his first public remarks on Covid-19 since Beijing dramatically loosened headline containment measures this month.

Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing the planet's biggest surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy.

Studies have estimated that around one million people could die over the next few months. Many in the population are now grappling with shortages of medicine, while emergency medical facilities are strained by an influx of unvaccinated elderly patients.

"At present, Covid-19 prevention and control in China are facing a new situation and new tasks," Xi said in a directive, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

"We should launch the patriotic health campaign in a more targeted way... fortify a community line of defence for epidemic

prevention and control, and effectively protect people's lives, safety and health," Xi said.

Hospitals and crematoriums across the country have been overflowing with Covid patients and victims, while China's National Health Commission on Sunday announced it would stop publishing daily nationwide infection and death statistics.

The decision to scrap the daily virus count comes amid concerns that the country's blooming wave of infections is not being accurately reflected in official statistics.

Beijing has admitted the scale of the outbreak has become "impossible" to track following the end of mandatory mass testing, as people are now not obliged to declare test results to authorities.

Unofficial surveys and modelling based on search engine terms suggest that the wave may have already peaked in some major cities, including Beijing and Chongqing.

Only six Covid deaths have been officially reported since Beijing unveiled most of its restrictions earlier this month.

