

## INDIAN KASHMIR

Rescuers scour debris after 60 killed in flood

AFP, Kishtwar

Indian rescuers yesterday pulled bodies from mud and rubble after the latest deadly flood to crash through a Himalayan village killed at least 60 people and washed away dozens more.

Torrents of water and mud driven by intense rain tore through Chisot village in Indian administered Kashmir on Thursday, leaving dozens missing, including Hindu pilgrims who were visiting a shrine. It is the second major deadly flooding disaster in India this month.

Officials said a large makeshift kitchen in Chisot, where more than 100 pilgrims were, was completely washed away by what Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah reported was a sudden "cloudburst" rain storm.



Arun Shah, 35, had just completed his pilgrimage with his family when the flood struck. "It was horrifying," he told AFP, speaking by telephone from a hospital in Kishtwar district, where Chisot is located.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization said last year that increasingly intense floods and droughts are a "distress signal" of what is to come as climate change makes the planet's water cycle ever more unpredictable.

Roads had already been damaged by days of heavy storms in Kishtwar district. The area lies more than 200 kilometres (125 miles) by road from the region's main city Srinagar.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the spate of disasters in his Independence Day speech in New Delhi on Friday.

"In the past few days, we have been facing natural disasters, landslides, cloudbursts, and many other calamities," he said. "Our sympathies are with the affected people. State governments and the central government are working together with full strength."

## Veggie prices

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why the government has been unable to control the kitchen markets.

During visits to kitchen markets in Shewrapara, Kazipara, Mirpur II, Ibrahimpur, Sukrabad, Farmgate, and Karwan Bazar, this newspaper found most vegetables selling for Tk 80-100 per kg, with prices varying based on quality.

Omar Faruk, a vegetable seller at Sukrabad kitchen market, said traders are having to buy vegetables at higher prices from wholesale markets.

"But customers don't understand that, and they get angry when I tell them the prices," he said.

Earlier, he used to buy at least 10 kilos of each vegetable, but now he buys only five. "Even then, I can't sell them all."

He said he has stopped selling round eggplants altogether because of their skyrocketing price.

Wholesalers claimed that prices have surged over the past 15 days due to crop damage caused by excessive rains, which reduced supply in wholesale markets.

Saifur Rahman Chowdhury Sujan, general secretary of the Karwan Bazar Brihattar Paikar Kachar Bazar Arot Byabasai Malik Samity, said, "The rain during the peak season damaged vegetables, lowering supply and driving up prices."

Locally produced onions are now selling for Tk 80-90 per kg, up from Tk 50-60 last month.

Although the ongoing monsoon is considered peak season for hilsa, prices of the popular fish remain high in the capital's markets.

Yesterday, hilsa weighing between 600 grammes and one kilogramme per piece was selling for Tk 1,400 to Tk 2,300 per kg.

Various naturally grown wetland fish, including spiny eels, flatheads, and shrimps, were priced at Tk 800 to Tk 1,200 per kg.

Farm-produced eggs are selling for Tk 135 to Tk 150 per dozen, up from Tk 135-140 a week ago.

Farm-grown Sonali chicken is selling for Tk 320 to Tk 350 per kg, while broiler chicken remains stable at Tk 160-170 per kg compared with last week.

## Janmashtami today

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members of the Hindu community on the occasion of Janmashtami. The day of Janmashtami is a public holiday in Bangladesh.

Temples, religious organisations, and various institutions have drawn up elaborate programmes to mark the occasion. National dailies will publish special articles, while Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television, and private TV and radio stations will air special programmes highlighting different aspects of the life and philosophy of Lord Sri Krishna.

Mahanagar Sarbanjanin Puja Committee has decided to observe the occasion centrally at Dhakeshwari National Temple.

The programmes include Geeta Joggro at 8:00am at Dhakeshwari temple. A Janmashtami procession will be brought out at 3:00pm from city's Palashi intersection.

The Geeta Joggro at the Dhakeshwari National Temple premises will be conducted by Shankar Math and Mission from Sitakunda, Chattogram.

Chief of Army Staff General Waker Uz Zaman will inaugurate the Janmashtami procession, which will also be attended

by Chief of Naval Staff Admiral M Nazmul Hassan, Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan and Bangladesh Army 9th Infantry Division GOC Major General Md Moin Khan, among others.

Parading through the streets in front of Jagannath Hall, Shaheed Minar, Doyel Chatter, High Court intersection, Banga Bazar and Golapshah Majar, the procession will come to an end at Bahadur Shah Park.

On August 19, a discussion will be held on Janmashtami at the Dhakeshwari National Temple. Primary and Mass Education Adviser

Professor Dr Bidhan Ranjan Roy Poddar will attend the function as the chief guest.

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) took a four day programme from August 14 at Swamibagh Asram in the capital to mark the festival.

The programme includes recitation from Srimad Bhagavad Geeta, performance of devotional songs, vocation, distribution of mahaprasadam, discussion, and a cultural function.

The festival will also be celebrated in temples across the country with different programmes.

## Amid the Sada Pathor outcry

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Despite sporadic efforts by the local administration, the looting continued. Locals say the illegal activities intensified at night.

A local from Jum Par said, "Workers dig at night. By morning, piles of stones lie ready for trucks, and sand is taken from the river by boat."

After ravaging most areas near the tourist attractions of Jaflong, the looters recently eyed the Zero Point area and started looting stones from there.

Locals say increased administrative vigilance following criticism over Sada Pathor limited the damage there.

Looting in Jaflong extends beyond riverbanks to schools, temples, tea estates, and homes. This correspondent witnessed encroachment on Ballapunj Government Primary School, Balibari Temple, Jaflong Tea Estate, and several local homesteads on Friday.

During the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, the government cancelled all Sylhet quarry leases. Stone lifting surged after the High

Court overturned the order on January 13 this year. In response, the government suspended leases for 17 of the country's 51 quarries on April 27.

"No leases will be given for quarries that are under court injunctions or located within declared Ecologically Critical Areas (ECA)," the government said at that time.

However, the illegal activities didn't stop.

To see the situation on the ground, on June 14, Energy Adviser Fouzul Kabir Khan and Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan visited Jaflong, but hundreds of locals blocked their motorcade, demanding that the suspension order be withdrawn. A Jubo Dal leader was suspended for leading the protests.

The Sylhet district administration also initiated a massive drive against stone crushers. It also strengthened oversight to stop stone transportation from different sites. During the drive, the administration disconnected power to over 150 stone crusher mills.

Transport owners retaliated with repeated strikes, supported by leaders of BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, NCP, and Islami Andolok. After meetings between officials, transport owners, traders, and political leaders, the drives were halted last month.

"I see an all-party consensus when it comes to stone extraction," Rizwana said Monday. "For the past four years I was able to halt extraction in Jaflong, but now, even as an adviser, I'm unable to do so."

Advocate Saheda Akther, divisional coordinator of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), said, "Jaflong is different from Sada Pathor as this is a designated Ecologically Critical Area. The administration's failure to protect Jaflong not only violates environmental laws, but also amounts to contempt of court."

"Now, we are seeing the administration is recovering the looted stones. This shows they knew the looters but took no action. Unless those responsible are held accountable, the situation

will not improve," she said.

Muhammad Sher Mahbub Murad, deputy commissioner of Sylhet, said the situation is under control. "We stopped looting at Zero Point and are restoring looted stones," he said.

"We have no estimation of looted stones, but we will be evaluating with the help of experts. Besides, a probe body is investigating the matter and will submit recommendations for necessary actions," he said.

Abdul Karim Kim, member secretary of Dhoriy Rokhkh Amra (DHORA) Sylhet chapter, said stone extraction never stopped even during the four-year ban period.

"When stone looting at Sada Pathor sparked nationwide criticisms, the looters continued extracting stone from the Zero Point of Jaflong. This proves how inactive the administration was," he said.

He alleges that stones are still being extracted from the Sreepur and Rangpuri areas in Jaintiapur upazila, where the administration has yet to take necessary action.

## Nearly 200 killed in Pakistan flash floods

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a mud-soaked hill, AFP photos showed.

Funeral prayers began in a paddock nearby, with people grieving in front of several bodies covered by blankets.

"I heard a loud noise as if

the mountain was sliding. I rushed outside and saw the entire area shaking, like it was the end of the world," Azizullah, a resident of Buner district, where there have been dozens of deaths and injuries, told AFP.

"I thought it was doomsday," he said.

The ground was trembling due to the force of the water, and it felt like death was staring me in the face," said Azizullah who, like many in the region,

uses only one name.

The meteorological department has issued a heavy rain alert for Pakistan's northwest, urging people to avoid "unnecessary exposure to vulnerable areas".

## Situation in Myanmar 'getting worse day by day'

Villagers in Rakhine state scavenge for food as hunger bites

AFP, Mrauk U

People in western Myanmar have been driven to scavenging for bamboo shoots, as humanitarian workers warn a wartime blockade and aid cutbacks led by Washington have caused hunger cases to surge.

"Another day has gone, and I have to struggle again for another day," fruit vendor Kyaw Win Shein told AFP in the town of Mrauk U in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

"It is getting worse day by day," the 60-year-old, whose business is faltering as prices rise and incomes drop -- a grim equation driving others to scour the countryside for sustenance.

Rakhine state -- a riverine slice of coastal Myanmar bordering Bangladesh -- has witnessed intense suffering in Myanmar's civil war, triggered by a 2021 coup deposing the democratic government.

As the military fights an ethnic armed group, it has blockaded the territory -- throttling supplies to its estimated population of 2.5 million.

The impoverished state has long been a focus of international aid organisations, but worldwide cutbacks spearheaded by US President Donald Trump's "America First" freeze on humanitarian funding have forced them to retreat.

The World Food Programme (WFP) -- which received nearly half its 2024 donations from the United States -- warned last week that 57 percent of families in central Rakhine are now unable to meet basic food needs. The figure had risen from just 33 percent in December.

"A deadly combination of conflict,

blockades, and funding cuts is driving a dramatic rise in hunger and malnutrition," the WFP said.

In northern Rakhine areas such as Mrauk U -- where conflict complicates data collection -- WFP warned the situation is "much worse".

Residents said fertiliser is scarce, reducing crop yields and making produce unaffordable, driving people to desperate measures in a tightening spiral of misery.

"I am not the only one who has difficulties," said fruit vendor Kyaw Win Shein. "Everyone is the same."

The village of Ponnagyun is a short distance from the state capital Sittwe, at the mouth of a delta opening onto the Bay of Bengal. Rakhine cuisine is famed for its fresh, simply cooked seafood, and fish is still on sale in markets. But people have no cash to buy it.

"People are starving in my village," said one resident who runs a Ponnagyun payphone shop, but asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. "People find and eat bamboo shoots mostly," he said. "People can eat it, but it's not nutritious."

He said only two aid handouts reached their community in the past year. The conflict blockade is so effective that currency notes are not leaving the state to be replaced with new ones for circulation, and instead are left crumpling from wear and tear in the pockets of customers and vendors.

"The commodity prices are really high," said 64-year-old Mrauk U resident Hla Paw Tun. Rakhine has long been wracked by civil conflict -- the site of alleged military atrocities against the resident Rohingya minority around 2017, which some countries have deemed a genocide.

"This is an affront to the dignity and autonomy of the 700,000 Americans who call DC home," Schwab added.

## US capital sues Trump govt over cop takeover

AFP, Washington

The attorney general for the US capital Washington has sued Donald Trump's administration over what he called a "hostile takeover" of the city's police force, which the Republican president said was necessary to fight violent crime.

Earlier this week, Trump placed the capital's Metropolitan Police under federal government control while also sending the National Guard onto the city's streets. Then Attorney General Pam Bondi issued an order to install a hand-picked official as temporary police commissioner.

Federal law governing the capital "does not authorize this brazen usurpation of the District's authority over its own government," Attorney General Brian Schwab wrote in a filing lodged in federal court.

Schwab has asked for an immediate stay on Bondi's order.

The government's actions "go well beyond the bounds of the President's limited authority and instead seek a hostile takeover of MPD," Schwab said in a statement on social media.

"This is an affront to the dignity and autonomy of the 700,000 Americans who call DC home," Schwab added.

## Ukraine targets Russian oil refinery, apartment block

AFP, Kyiv

Ukrainian drones hit a Russian oil refinery and an apartment block in an overnight attack just hours before US President Donald Trump hosts his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for a high-stakes summit in Alaska.

Kyiv has targeted Russia's oil depots and refineries in long-range drone attacks in what it calls retaliatory strikes for Moscow's nightly barrages of Ukrainian cities and its energy grid.

The Ukrainian military said yesterday it hit a large oil refinery in the central Russian city of Syzran, some 800 kilometres (500 miles) behind the front line.

"The Syzran oil refinery in the Samara region of Russia, one of the largest in the Rosneft system, was hit," Ukraine's general staff said, referring to the network of facilities owned by Russian state-run energy giant Rosneft.

It said the facility produced aviation fuel and supplied the Russian army.

Unverified images on social media showed multiple fires and grey smoke billowing from the site at dawn yesterday. A separate Ukrainian drone

strike on an apartment block in the Russian border region of Kursk killed one person and wounded 10 others, local Russian officials said.

"Unfortunately, a 45-year-old woman died on the spot," Governor Alexander Khinshten said in a video on Telegram, standing in front of a blown-out window.

Russian attacks also continued, with Ukrainian officials in the frontline Kharhiv and Donetsk regions reporting six civilians killed in strikes over the last 24 hours.

Ukraine has previously vowed to step up its long-range strikes against Russia as Moscow launched record numbers of missiles and drones at Ukraine in June and July.

Russia's army said Ukraine fired 53 drones overnight, while Ukraine's air force said Moscow launched 97.

## SENSE OF TRANQUILITY

BESIDE GULSHAN LAKE.</