

## International

# Anger as hopes fade for Indian workers after glacier disaster

## Kin of 30 people still trapped in tunnel jostle with police

**TAPOVAN, India:** Dozens of angry and desperate relatives of about 30 people trapped in a tunnel since a glacier disaster in India jostled with police yesterday as hopes faded that they would be found alive. More than 170 people were still missing after a barrage of water and debris hurtled with terrifying speed and power down a valley on Sunday morning, sweeping away bridges and roads and hitting two hydroelectric plants.

Thirty-two bodies have been found so far, officials said yesterday. It may take days for more bodies to be recovered under the tons of rocks and other debris and the thick blanket of grey mud. The main focus of the massive rescue operation, under way day and night since Sunday, is a tunnel near a severely damaged hydroelectric plant that was under construction at Tapovan in Uttarakhand state.

Workers there have been battling their way through hundreds of tons of sludge, boulders and other obstacles to try and reach between 25 and 35 people who rescuers hope are still alive in air pockets.

"As time passes, the chances of finding them are reducing. But miracles do happen," Piyosh Rautela, a senior state disaster relief official told AFP. "We are working round the clock-man, machinery we are all working round the clock. But the amount of debris is so much that it's going to take a while to remove all that," he said.

### 'A joke'

Outside there were medical teams on standby

with oxygen cylinders and stretchers, as well as increasingly desperate and enraged relatives. There have been no signs that their loved ones are still alive. "This entire rescue operation is a joke," Sanjay Pant, whose 24-year-old electrical engineer brother Abhishek was in the tunnel, said. "We are not living in the 18th century where just one bulldozer can be used to clear tons of slush. Where is our technology, where are our machines?"

"Authorities are not showing any urgency to rescue those trapped. Another day and we will have to give up hope," said Santosh Yadav whose brother-in-law Sanjay was also in the tunnel.

"They cannot survive too long in the tunnel even if they are alive now. There is no air, water or food inside and it is freezing cold inside the tunnel. Only God can save them."

Shuhil Dhiman, 47, said that his brother-in-law Praveen Diwan, a private contractor and father of three, had driven into the tunnel on Sunday morning with three others when the flood hit.

"I am hoping against hope," he said. "The authorities are doing their best but the situation is beyond anyone's ability," he said.

### Climate change

Twenty-five of the bodies recovered so far were yet to be identified. Many of the victims are poor workers from hundreds of miles away in other parts of India. The cause of the disaster is thought to have been a chunk of glacier breaking off. Glaciers have



**CHAMOLI, India:** Family members of the people trapped in a tunnel after the flash floods shout slogans to protest alleging slow pace of rescue operation in Tapovan, Chamoli district, yesterday. —AFP

been melting rapidly in the Himalayan region because of global warming, and experts predict similar catastrophes in the future.

Building activity for dams, the dredging of

riverbeds for sand and the clearing of forests for new roads—some to beef up defense on the Chinese border, others for pilgrims—are other factors. —AFP

## Myanmar military tightens grip amid anti-coup protests

**YANGON:** Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Myanmar's biggest city for a fifth consecutive day yesterday, defying a ban on protests as the military moved to tighten its grip on the country. Crowds swarmed through Yangon demanding the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, facing down police a day after officers dispersed crowds elsewhere with tear gas and rubber bullets, and ramped up their harassment of the ousted leader's party.

The sudden escalation of force against the demonstrations sweeping the country since last week's coup prompted a fresh chorus of international condemnation after officers fired live rounds at one rally in the capital Naypyidaw. Two people were critically wounded in the incident—including one woman who was shot in the head. Images depicting her in the moments after she was shot were by Wednesday appearing on a huge protest banner and had been widely shared online alongside expressions of grief and fury.

"They can shoot a young woman

but they can't steal the hope and resolve of a determined people," UN special rapporteur Tom Andrews said yesterday. Massive crowds returned to the streets of Yangon yesterday, where the day before they had faced off against a phalanx of riot police standing alongside water cannon trucks near Suu Kyi's residence.

Though there were no reported clashes with authorities in the commercial hub on Tuesday, university student Khin Nyein Wai said she was still afraid. "I still came out as I do not like the military dictatorship," she told AFP. "This is for our future."

More politicians from Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy were detained on Tuesday along with 30 others—including a journalist from local broadcaster DVB—at a protest in Mandalay, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group said. Their arrests came as police fired tear gas at protesters in the city who were waving red NLD flags.

State media claimed that the crowd



**YANGON:** Protesters dressed in cosplay outfits hold up signs during a demonstration against the February 1 military coup in Yangon yesterday. —AFP

had used "obscene language" and thrown objects at police, injuring four officers, in its first direct mention of the protests since they began on the weekend. "Therefore, the police members dispersed in accordance with the methods and laws," the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported, without mentioning other police confrontations elsewhere in the country. But elsewhere the disci-

pline of security forces appeared to be breaking down, with four officers defecting from their lines in the eastern town of Loikaw to join the anti-coup protests, according to local media reports. Soldiers raided NLD headquarters in Yangon after night fell, but party member Soe Win told AFP that his colleagues had been prevented from intervening due to a blanket curfew imposed on the city. —AFP

## New Zealand Maori MP defies tie rule, rejects 'colonial noose'

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand's parliament backed down yesterday after rejecting a Maori lawmaker because he refused to wear a tie, allowing him to speak without an accessory he labeled a "colonial noose". The issue flared on Tuesday when Maori Party co-leader Rawiri Waititi was ejected from the parliamentary debating chamber for not wearing the required attire during question time.

Waititi, who has a full-face "te moko" tattoo and dons a black cowboy hat, argued that he was wearing legitimate Maori business attire—a traditional pendant. "This is not about ties, it's about cultural identity," he said as he left. Indigenous Maori make up about 15 percent of New Zealand's five million population but are over-represented in statistics such as

poverty and imprisonment, with many blaming injustices dating back to the days of British colonial rule.

Waititi said the tie row showed race relations still needed to improve in the South Pacific nation. "This is a breach of the rights of indigenous peoples, we (must) have the freedom to express our cultural identity in a space like this," he said. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she had no objection to lawmakers not wearing ties but added "there are much more important issues for all of us".

After strictly enforcing the dress code on Tuesday, parliamentary speaker Trevor Mallard took a more relaxed approach when a tie-less Waititi spoke yesterday.

Rather than have the Maori leader ejected, Mallard simply let him ask a



**WELLINGTON:** This television frame grab taken from TVNZ television shows co-leader of New Zealand's Maori party Rawiri Waititi simulating a noose during his maiden speech in Wellington. —AFP

question unhindered, later saying a permanent rule change was being considered. Waititi was elected to parliament for the first time last year and in his maiden speech recounted the tale of an ancestor who was wrongly

hanged by the British for murder.

"I will adorn myself with the treasures of my ancestors and remove the colonial noose around my neck so that I may sing my song," he said as he removed his tie. —AFP

## Bangladesh Islamists to hang over publisher's murder

**DHAKA:** Eight Islamic extremists were yesterday sentenced to death in Bangladesh for the murder of a publisher, as the Muslim-majority nation grapples with tensions between religious hardliners and secularists. Faisal Arefin Dipan, 43, the owner of a Dhaka-based publishing house that had released several atheist books, was hacked to death in October 2015 by men suspected to be members of a local jihadist group.

The attack was part of a wave of violence between 2013 and 2016 targeting secular activists, bloggers and atheist writers. Several top Islamist political party leaders were hanged over the violence under the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Prosecutor Golam Sarwar Zakir told AFP that the judge at Dhaka's Special Anti-

Terrorism Tribunal had convicted all of the eight accused men. "He (the judge) said their goal was to muzzle people's voices by murdering bloggers, writers and publishers. They wanted to disrupt public security by creating panic among the people," Zakir said. Two of the men are still on the loose and were sentenced in absentia, including mastermind Syed Ziaul Haque, a sacked army officer, Zakir added.

Haque has been charged with the killings of several secular activists. A defense lawyer for the eight men said they would appeal against the sentences.

The Bangladesh government has set up two major anti-terrorism police units in recent years to crack down on Islamic extremists. More than 100 suspected Islamists have been killed in anti-terror raids across the country and hundreds have been detained. Around half-a-dozen Islamist militant outfits have been banned. Star Bangladeshi cricketer Shakib Al Hasan has become the latest target of radicals and had to be given an armed bodyguard after he was threatened for attending a Hindu ceremony in neighboring India. —AFP

## Pakistan commutes death sentences of 2 mentally disabled

**LAHORE:** Two mentally disabled prisoners on death row had their sentences commuted yesterday by Pakistan's Supreme Court in what activists called a landmark judgment on mental illness. The top court ordered Kanizan Bibi and Imdad Ali to be transferred to a mental health facility and called for the case of a third inmate facing execution to be reviewed. It also called for the establishment of a medical board to vet inmates for mental illness in capital cases.

"The Supreme Court of Pakistan has made a landmark judgment in the case of three mentally ill death row prisoners," said Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), a legal nonprofit representing the three inmates.

"We hope the guidelines detailed in the judgment will permeate to all levels of the judiciary and prison staff so that mental illnesses can be detected and treated instead of being ignored and denied," JPP spokesperson Ali Haider Habib added. —AFP

## Two killed as multiple bombs rock Kabul

**KABUL:** At least two people, including a local police chief, were killed after multiple bomb blasts rocked the Afghan capital early yesterday, officials said. The latest violence in Kabul follows a pattern of attacks during morning rush-hour traffic targeting prominent Afghans including politicians, journalists, activists and judges. Police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters that two people were killed and another wounded in their vehicle by a bomb in downtown Kabul.

Interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian told AFP that one of those killed was a district police chief in the capital. An AFP photograph at the scene said the bomb had ripped through the rear of what appeared to be an armored vehicle.

Minutes earlier, another blast targeting a vehicle in the same district wounded four people, Faramarz added. A third blast targeted a police vehicle in Paghman district on the outskirts of Kabul. Authorities did not say if the blasts were caused by so-called "sticky bombs" attached to the vehicles, or roadside improvised explosive devices.

Yesterday's blasts come a day after militants shot dead four government employees in an ambush in the capital. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attacks. Afghan and US officials have blamed the Taliban for the wave of violence, but the group has denied the charges. The surge in violence comes as peace talks that started in September between the Taliban and Afghan government have so far failed to achieve a breakthrough. —AFP

## Hong Kong radio host denied bail

**HONG KONG:** A Hong Kong internet radio host was denied bail yesterday under Beijing's new national security law—even though he has not been charged with an offence under the sweeping legislation. The court's decision illustrates how the presumption of bail for non-violent crimes—once a hallmark of Hong Kong's common law legal system—is being swept away by the new national security law and expanded to include other offences.

Wan Yiu-sing, 52, was charged earlier this week with sedition, a colonial-era law, for the content of four online talk shows he hosted last year. Yesterday he was remanded into custody ahead of his eventual trial after a judge decided his alleged sedition offences were a national security risk.

It comes a day after Hong Kong's top court delivered a landmark judgment concerning bail for national security crimes. On Tuesday the Court of Final Appeal said the security law "creates such a specific exception to the general rule in favor of the grant of bail and imports a stringent threshold requirement for bail applications". The ruling also said offences outside the security law could also be considered national security risks where bail might be denied, offering treason, sedition and "incitement to disaffection" as examples.

The sedition charges against Wan are only the second time the colonial-era law has been used since Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China. Last year another internet radio host was also charged with sedition and remanded into custody. Police and prosecutors are using an expanded suite of legal powers to pursue dissidents following huge and often violent democracy protests in 2019. —AFP