

45,000 LEFT HOMELESS AFTER INDONESIA QUAKE

JAKARTA: Tens of thousands of people have been displaced after a devastating earthquake in Indonesia killed more than 100 people, an official said yesterday, leaving communities in ruins as aid trickled into the disaster-stricken province. "We have 45,300 people evacuating in several places as of Saturday morning," national disaster agency spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho told AFP, adding that the number of displaced had almost doubled since Friday due to an influx of new data.

The shallow 6.5-magnitude quake earlier this week leveled hundreds of homes, mosques and businesses across Aceh province, one of the areas worst

affected by the devastating 2004 tsunami. More than 700 people were injured in the quake, many seriously, according to the country's disaster agency. Most of the displaced spent the night outdoors in tents near their ruined homes as hundreds refused to move into shelters fearing aftershocks, Nugroho added.

The army has established kitchens, shelters and a field hospital in the hard-hit town of Meureudu to help the region's overwhelmed health facilities. Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited Meureudu Friday, pledging to rebuild the area's devastated communities as he called on Indonesians to pray

for their countrymen. The archipelago nation experiences frequent seismic and volcanic activity due to its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where tectonic plates collide.

A huge undersea earthquake in 2004 triggered a tsunami that engulfed several countries around the Indian Ocean, killing more than 170,000 people in Indonesia alone, the vast majority in Aceh.

The province lies on the northern tip of Sumatra island, which is particularly prone to quakes. In June a 6.5-magnitude quake struck off the west of Sumatra, damaging scores of buildings and injuring eight people. — AFP



ACEH: Police officers help clear rubble at the ruin of a mosque collapsed in Wednesday's earthquake. — AP



SEOUL: Protesters hold candles during a rally against South Korea's President Park Geun-Hye in central Seoul yesterday. — AFP

SOUTH KOREANS CELEBRATE PARK IMPEACHMENT, BUT ANXIETY TOO

ACTIVISTS INTEND TO KEEP UP THE PRESSURE

SEOUL: Tens of thousands celebrated the impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-Hye at a rally in Seoul on Saturday, but amid the euphoria there was lingering anger, and anxiety at the prospect of an extended period of political uncertainty. For the seventh straight week, protesters gathered en masse in the streets of the capital, but the mood was generally festive, after lawmakers on Friday voted overwhelmingly to impeach the deeply unpopular Park over a corruption scandal.

Although the move stripped Park of her substantial executive powers, activists said they intended to keep up the pressure, with the impeachment still requiring final approval from the Constitutional Court—a process that could take months. And many were adamant that the president should resign immediately and face criminal prosecution. "We are still hungry" the crowd in Seoul's Gwanghwamun chanted, as they also sang along to the revised lyrics of a Christmas song that read: "Only after she is out, will it be a Merry Christmas."

Organisers put the turnout at around 600,000 — smaller than previous weeks when the crowds passed the million mark. Until the court rules, Park's authority is only suspended and she retains the title of president and the immunity from prosecution that goes with it. And she still has her supporters, many of them elderly voters who remain steadfast admirers of her father, the late military dictator Park Chung-Hee-credited as

the architect of the South's economic transformation but vilified as an authoritarian rights abuser.

Don't cry

A large portrait of a young Park with her father formed the centrepiece of a pro-Park rally in Seoul earlier on Saturday that drew around 15,000 people. Waving national flags, they carried banners that read: "President Park, Don't Cry" and "Nullify impeachment". Park was impeached on numerous counts of constitutional and criminal violations ranging from a failure to protect people's lives to bribery and abuse of power. Most of the charges stemmed from an investigation into a scandal involving the president's long-time friend, Choi Soon-Sil, who is currently awaiting trial for fraud and embezzlement. Prosecutors named Park a suspect in the case, saying she colluded in Choi's efforts to strong arm donations from large companies worth tens of millions of dollars.

The impeachment process was ignited and fuelled by public outrage at Park's behaviour, with the weekly mass demonstrations demanding that politicians take a pro-active role in removing her from the presidential Blue House. The National Assembly has played its part, but the country now faces a lengthy period of uncertainty at a time of slowing economic growth and elevated military tensions with nuclear-armed North Korea. "We have only overcome one challenge. The challenges that follow will be bigger,"

said Kim Young-Ho who attended Saturday's rally with members of the Korean Farmers' League.

Unelected leader

The man charged with steering the country through these dangerous waters is a former prosecutor who has never held elected office. As Park's prime minister, Hwang Kyo-Ahn became the temporary guardian of her sweeping executive powers the moment after she was impeached. A stern and not particularly popular figure, Hwang is seen as a Park loyalist and there were numerous chants at Saturday's rally for him to resign as well.

Flung into a role he had never sought, Hwang sought to strike a reassuring tone during an emergency cabinet meeting on Saturday. "The government is carrying out all measures necessary to prevent any government vacuum and ease the people's anxiety," Hwang said, adding that he had instructed the military to be extra vigilant to any move by North Korea to exploit the current situation.

North Korea has conducted two nuclear tests this year and multiple missile launches, prompting South Korea to agree to host a sophisticated US anti-missile system-despite protests from China. Contributing to the general anxiety is the presidential power transition in the United States, a key economic and military ally which has nearly 30,000 troops permanently stationed in South Korea. — AFP

MALAYSIA POLICE KILL KEY ABU SAYYAF MILITANT IN SHOOTOUT

MANILA: Malaysian security forces have killed a key member of a Philippine Islamist militant group in a shootout in waters off Sabah in Borneo, the Philippine military said yesterday. Abu Sayyaf leader, Abraham Hamid, had led the kidnapping of several foreigners from a tourist resort in the volatile southern Philippines last year, two of whom were later beheaded.

"The death of Hamid is a big blow to the (Abu Sayyaf) as it neutralized one of the notorious bandits and will degrade their capability for spotting and kidnapping victims in the future," said regional military spokesman Major Filemon Tan. Two other militants were killed alongside Hamid in the shootout with Malaysian police in Lahad Datu in eastern Sabah, he said.

The Abu Sayyaf beheaded two Canadian hostages after demands for millions of dollars were not met, but released two others, a Norwegian and Filipina, after ransoms were believed to be paid. Tan said Hamid had also been involved in the kidnapping

of four Indonesian crewmen in April. There have been a spate of kidnappings of Malaysian and Indonesian sailors at sea in recent months that have been blamed on the Abu Sayyaf.

While Hamid and two militants were killed, Sabah security forces have arrested two others, Tan added. Sabah police chief Abdul Rashid Harun told AFP the incident was the Malaysian authorities' first direct confrontation with suspected kidnappers in the waters off eastern Sabah. On his blog, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak praised his security forces and said Kuala Lumpur and Manila would cooperate to fight the recurring kidnappings. The Abu Sayyaf, a loose network of militants based on remote islands in the southern Philippines, has defied more than a decade of military offensives. The group was formed in the 1990s with seed money from Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network, but has been on a lucrative kidnapping spree in recent years. — AFP

A LOOK AT SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

SEOUL: Fresh off impeachment, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's days in office may be numbered. Her potential successors include the outgoing secretary general of the United Nations, an ambitious mayor who has been compared to both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, and the man who conceded the presidential race to Park four years ago.

Park was suspended as president following a parliamentary impeachment vote Friday. She will be formally removed from office if six of the Constitutional Court's nine justices support her impeachment in a review that could take up to six months. The chances of the court reinstating Park are considered low, and if she's unseated, the country must hold a presidential election within 60 days. A look at the contenders:

Ban ki-moon

A career diplomat, Ban has been seen as a future South Korean president ever since the U.N. made him secretary general in October 2006. He could be the best hope for conservatives to win back the Blue House - South Korea's presidential office - after Park's collapse complicated politics for her party. Ban will step down as UN chief at the end of the year after two five-year terms. Questioned on the matter countless times, Ban has never officially declared an ambition to run for South Korean president. But he has never denied interest either. In a visit to South Korea in May, Ban told reporters that he would "think hard about what to do as a citizen" after he returns home on Jan 1. Local media saw this as a clear hint at a presidential bid.

If he does make a run for the Blue House, Ban could represent Park's ailing Saenuri Party, which is likely to regroup soon around anti-Park reformists. Or he could be the face of a new party created by defectors from Saenuri and the liberal opposition. Ban's supporters point to his credibility as an internationally known and respected diplomat and say he would show more imagination and skill in dealing with nuclear-armed North Korea than the rigid Park. His detractors point to his lack of domestic experience and argue that he did an unremarkable job in a high-profile post.

Lee jae-myung

Lee, the outspoken mayor of Seongnam city and member of the main opposition Democratic Party, entered the year as a fringe presidential contender. But he has enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity in recent months amid rage over the Park

scandal. Lee, a factory worker and human rights lawyer before entering politics, brands himself as an anti-establishment figure and has a habit of firing off diatribes on Facebook and Twitter. He doesn't mind comparisons to Trump, although he says he would prefer to be a "successful Bernie Sanders."

Lee calls for stronger policies to reduce the widening gap between rich and poor and help blue-collar families. He also endorses breaking up the "chaebol" - the large, family-owned conglomerates that dominate the country's economy. They have been long accused of hurting competition and breeding a culture of corruption through bribery of politicians for favors. The message has won him many fans in recent weeks. His supporters portray him as a passionate reformist; critics see a dangerous populist riding a tide of public anger. "We have been ruled by a small class of the privileged... let's make with our own hands a democratic republic where everybody is treated equally," Lee told a cheering crowd during one of the massive rallies calling for the removal of Park, who prosecutors accuse of colluding with a confidante to extort money and favors.

Moon jae-in

While Ban and Lee have been hogging headlines, opinion polls show it's actually Moon, the liberal runner-up to Park in the 2012 election, who's the favorite. A recent survey measured Moon's support at 23.5 percent, ahead of Ban's 18.2 percent. The Democratic Party's presidential primaries may become a showdown between Moon and Lee, who had 16.6 percent support.

Moon, a former human rights lawyer and aide to late liberal President Roh Moo-hyun, pledges to fight income inequality, strengthen social welfare systems and push business reforms to curb chaebol excesses and create a level playing field for smaller companies. While Moon would be a safe choice, there are questions about whether he can win; in the presidential election four years ago, his 48 percent of the vote fell short of Park's 51.6 percent. Conservatives over the years have attacked Moon over his links with the Roh government, which pursued rapprochement policies with North Korea that led to big trade and cultural exchanges between the rivals. Such policies were criticized after Pyongyang expanded its nuclear weapons and missiles programs; subsequent conservative governments scrapped the effort. Moon continues to argue that Seoul should put dialogue over sanctions in persuading Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions. — AP



GOLD COAST: This file photo taken on October 26, 2016 shows Dreamworld CEO Craig Davidson laying flowers at a makeshift floral tribute at the Dreamworld theme park on the Gold Coast, a day after four people were killed on a malfunctioning park ride. — AFP

AUSTRALIA BIGGEST THEME PARK RE-OPENS WITHOUT KILLER RIDE

SYDNEY: Australia's biggest theme park reopened quietly yesterday without the water ride that killed four people and faces demolition. Two women and two men died on the Thunder River Rapids attraction at the once hugely popular Dreamworld tourist resort on the Gold Coast on October 25. Owner Ardent Leisure, which came in for heavy criticism for the way it handled the tragedy after trying to re-open before the funerals, has decommissioned Thunder River.

But the park's nine big thrill spills remained closed Saturday as safety inspections continue, leaving only family rides operating. "Our hearts and thoughts remain firmly with the families who lost loved ones in the tragic accident," said chief executive Craig Davidson. "Every single attraction open today has been passed by an unprecedented multi-level safety review," he told reporters. "We would like to invite the community back through our doors," @Dreamworld_AU tweeted. — AFP

INDONESIAN POLICE EVACUATE CITIZENS AFTER BOMB FOUND

JAKARTA: Indonesian police said they evacuated a neighborhood on the outskirts of the capital yesterday after discovering a bomb in a raid on suspected Islamic militants who were planning to attack the presidential palace. National Police spokesman Boy Rafli Amar said people living within a 300-meter (yard) radius of the boarding house that was raided were evacuated. Police explosive experts were at the scene.

Amar said two men and one woman were arrested. The bomb was encased in a pressure cooker, a police photograph broadcast on TV showed. Umar Surya Fana, the police chief of Bekasi, a Jakarta satellite city where the evacuated neighborhood is located, said the two men were arrested shortly after leaving the boarding house. The woman was arrested in the boarding house.

Fana said that the militants were monitored by the counterterrorism squad, and that police believed they had been planning to bomb the presidential palace during a guard-changing ceremony that is a tourist attraction in Jakarta. A will of the woman seized during the investigation stated her desire to take part in "amaliyah," an Arabic term used by extremist groups for attacks or suicide bombings. Amar said the three who were arrested are suspected to be part of a militant network linked to a bomb-making lab raided last month in West Java province. Those arrested last month planned to bomb targets in Jakarta, including the parliament and the Myanmar Embassy. — AP



LES CAYES, Haiti: In this file photo, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon waves to people whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Matthew, as he visits a school where they have sought shelter. — AP