

FIJI HIT BY 'STRONGEST EVER' CYCLONE, BRACED FOR EVACUATIONS

SUVA, Fiji: Fiji was yesterday struck by its most powerful ever cyclone, according to reports, as the island nation batted down the hatches with a blanket curfew and mass evacuations. The category five super-storm hit the main island of Viti Levu overnight, according to the Joint Typhoon Warning Center, with flights cancelled and evacuation centres activated earlier in the day.

"As a nation, we are facing an ordeal of the most grievous kind," Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama said in a national address. "We must stick together as a people and look after each other. Be alert and be prepared." Severe tropical cyclone Winston, with average winds of 220 kilometres (136 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 315 kilometres per hour, was the first ever category five storm to hit the nation, the Fiji Times reported.

"This mega storm has the potential to cause catastrophic damage across Fiji, an island nation frequented by hundreds of thousands of holiday-goers

every year," said Iris Low-McKenzie, CEO of Save the Children Fiji.

"It looks as though the storm could pass over the international airport in Nadi, which, if significant damage is caused, will make the humanitarian response all the more difficult," she added.

National Disaster Management director Akapusi Tuifagalele told the Fijilive website that 758 evacuation centres had been set up in the nation of about 900,000. Winston brushed by the more northerly island of Vanua Levu yesterday afternoon, with unconfirmed reports of trees felled and roofs blown off houses.

"I've never seen such a strong cyclone as this one in 60 years," resident Zelim Hussein told AFP by phone. "This is a monster cyclone, without doubt the strongest we've ever experienced. We're all very scared and hope it goes away quickly."

Fiji Airways, Virgin Australia and Jetstar all cancelled flights to the holi-

day hotspot, which is a popular destination for Australians and New Zealanders. The government imposed a nation-wide curfew on Saturday night, with the prime minister warning residents not to go outdoors.

"The threat of being hit by flying debris is extremely high," he said. Winston has been moving around the South Pacific for a week, skirting around Vanuatu and Tonga and has previously taken aim at Fiji before veering away. Cyclones are common in the South Pacific and their impact is notoriously difficult to predict, with major storms capable of causing major devastation but sometimes blowing themselves out with relatively little damage. The UN humanitarian agency (OCHA) said it was ready to support the disaster management office if required. Winston had the potential to bring "destructive winds, heavy rains, dangerous storm surge and a high risk of both flash and river flooding", OCHA said in a statement. — AFP



LABASA: People are splashed by a wave whipped up by the encroaching cyclone Winston in Labasa yesterday. The Pacific island nation of Fiji is hunkering down as a formidable cyclone with winds of 300 kilometres (186 miles) per hour approaches. — AP



INCHEON: People arrive from Baengnyeong island, at Incheon port, South Korea, yesterday. — AP

N KOREA CONDUCTED ARTILLERY DRILL NEAR SEA BORDER: SEOUL ISLAND RESIDENTS PREPARE FOR EVACUATION

SEOUL: Sounds of explosions caused South Korean residents of a front-line island to prepare to evacuate early yesterday, but it was later determined that the noise came from a North Korean artillery drill across the rivals' disputed maritime border, officials said.

The false alarm was indicative of the high anxiety between the Koreans in the wake of the North's recent long-range rocket launch and nuclear test.

Hours later, North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency hurled insults at South Korean President Park Geun-hye, calling her a "tailless, old, insane bitch" as it condemned her hard-line response to the North's recent actions. The government of Park, who has been a frequent target of sexist comments from the North, shut down a factory park in North Korea that had been jointly run by the rivals. Seoul also has started preparatory talks with Washington on deploying a sophisticated missile defense system in South Korea in attempts to tighten the screws on Pyongyang.

North Korea also labeled as "laughable" Washington's new sanctions against Pyongyang, which were signed into law by President Barack Obama on Thursday and are aimed at denying the North the money to develop miniaturized warheads and the long-range missiles required to deliver them.

Despite the US sanctions, the North will continue to "raise high" its official policy of simultaneously developing nuclear weapons and its economy, an unnamed Foreign Ministry spokesman said in a separate KCNA dispatch.

South Korea's front-line soldiers near the northwest island of Baengnyeong heard several explosions and also saw flashes from what the military believes were shells fired from North Korean coastal guns at around 7:20 a.m., said an official from Seoul's Defense Ministry, who didn't want to be named, citing office rules. No North Korean projectile flew south of the maritime border, he said.

An official from the county that governs

the island said that residents didn't evacuate, but that fishing boats returned to their ports. She said that passenger vessels from the island and the mainland port of Incheon were operating normally.

Meanwhile, Seoul's Defense Ministry said the military completed its search operations for debris from the North Korean long-range rocket that was launched into orbit Feb. 7.

The military said it was unlikely that there were any more crucial parts left to be found in South Korean seas. The ministry said that the navy recovered two pieces of debris presumed to be from the launch at an island off the country's western coast on Thursday and Friday.

South Korean officials believe the North deliberately blew up the rocket's first stage after burnout to prevent South Korea from retrieving debris. North Korea said it launched an Earth observation satellite, but South Korea, the US and the UN said it violated a ban on Pyongyang's missile technology. — AP

JUNTA-RULED THAILAND FLIRTS WITH RUSSIA AS US TIES COOL

BANGKOK: Thailand is pursuing closer ties and possible arms deals - with Russia, with relations between Thailand and its traditional partner, the United States, cooling in the wake of a May 2014 coup. Two Thai deputy prime ministers will travel to Russia, just weeks after a visit to Bangkok by the powerful head of Russia's security council, Nikolai Patrushev. On the table, officials from both countries say, are wide-ranging talks on trade and security cooperation, as Russia seeks to develop its position as an Asian power.

Most attention has been focused on Thailand's warming ties with China, including talks on a massive rail project and the possible purchase of \$1 billion worth of Chinese-made submarines.

But Russia appears keen to compete for Thailand's attention. In the last 18 months, Thai junta leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha has met three times with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who visited Thailand in April 2015, the Russian ambassador to Thailand, Kirill Barsky, told Reuters. Prayuth will travel to Russia in May for a meeting between Russia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

"THE US WON'T SELL"

The big prize of talks - and of most strategic concern to the United States - is in defence. Thailand served as a staging ground for American forces during the Vietnam War, and the Pentagon values its strategic access to the Southeast Asian nation's airfields and ports. But for a second straight year, the United States scaled back regional military exercises, known as "Cobra Gold", which Thailand hosted earlier this month. Thai media have reported that Thailand is seeking to buy dozens of Russian T-90 tanks to

replace part of its ageing US-made fleet.

In an interview, Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan told Reuters no decision had been made on the tanks. But US restrictions on the sale of arms to the military-ruled country means Thailand needs to shop elsewhere for the roughly 50 tanks it needs, he said. "The US won't sell weaponry to us, and as of late we've been on a tight budget and can't afford them," Prawit said. A 2011 deal to buy 49 tanks from Ukraine fell through after only 10 were delivered, he noted.

Thailand is on course to sign an agreement with Russia covering counter-terrorism and is looking to buy Russian hardware, such as helicopters, for disaster response, he said.

"It's not that we've decided to be on good terms with China and Russia and not with the US. We're equally good to all of them."

"THIS IS OUR DESTINY"

Russia has made it clear that its approach to Thailand is part of a broader push for Asian influence. But this will not necessarily be at the expense of China or the United States, Barsky, ambassador Barsky said.

"Russia does not need to prove to anybody that Russia is an Asian power, an Asia-Pacific power, a Euro-Pacific power. This is our destiny as a country which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific coast," he said. Next week's visit will include talks on 25 separate draft agreements, including on trade, culture, technology and security, he said. Prawit will meet Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin and Trade Minister Denis Manturov for talks on military and technical cooperation, Barsky said. — Reuters

THAI TOP COP CHARGED OVER SCANDAL-MIRED ROYAL CYCLING EVENT

BANGKOK: A well-known high-ranking Thai police officer who disappeared from the public sphere four months ago has been charged with malfeasance, police said yesterday, the latest twist in a shadowy purge of planners behind a birthday parade for the queen.

Former police spokesman Prawut Thavornsiri was a familiar face who appeared on daily television broadcasts with updates on high profile criminal cases, including the bombing in Bangkok last year that killed 20 people. He suddenly vacated his post in late October during a probe into another policeman and two others accused of exploiting their connections to the monarchy to profit off "Bike for Mom" - a massive cycling event that celebrated Queen Sirikit's birthday in August.

Those men were charged with defaming the royal family, a broadly interpreted crime that carries a 15 year jail sentence in a country where palace intrigue is shrouded in secrecy and rumour.

Two of those jailed over the event were later found dead in their prison cells within weeks of each other in November, according to police, a string of events that shocked the public.

On Saturday deputy police chief Sriwarah Rangsitpramkul said Prawut, who has not been seen in public since the purge, had also been charged for his involvement in the cycling event, which was led by the 63-year-old crown prince. The former spokesman will be prosecuted for installing antennas on a Bangkok building that were used in connection with the event, he said, without elaborating on what the radio transmitters were used for.

He also confirmed that Prawut had not returned to Thailand. "General Prawut Thavornsiri, former national police spokesman, is currently not in the kingdom but it will not affect our summoning him to hear the charges of malfeasance," said Sriwarah. — AFP



MALANG: Indonesian police officers stand guard outside the house of a suspected militant following a raid in Malang yesterday. — AP

INDONESIAN POLICE ARREST 41 ISLAMIST MILITANTS

JAKARTA: Indonesian police have arrested dozens of suspected Islamic militants on the main island of Java as authorities get set to tighten anti-terrorism laws following last month's deadly attack in Jakarta. Central Java police spokesman Col. Liliék Darmanto says police early yesterday arrested 36 men who were attending military-style training at an alleged jihadi camp on the remote slopes of Mount Sumbing. Police are investigating the men's possi-

ble links to Islamic radicalism. Officers seized air rifles, knives, jihadi books and flags in the raid. Separately, police say five suspected militants were captured late Friday in Malang, a hilly city in East Java province.

Indonesia's government has submitted to parliament a new anti-terrorism law that would enable authorities to hold suspects involved in radicalism and extremism for up to six months. — AP

THOUSANDS MARRY IN MASS CEREMONY IN SOUTH KOREA

GAPYEONG, South Korea: About 3,000 couples from 62 countries tied the knot in South Korea yesterday, in a mass wedding ceremony conducted by the Unification Church founded by the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon. A further 12,000 couples worldwide participated in the ceremony via the Internet, said Ryu Kyeong-seuk, president of the South Korean headquarters of the church.

Moon, who died in 2012 at the age of 92, had presided over mass weddings since the early 1960s.

His widow, Hak Ja Han Moon, officiated at yesterday's ceremony, which was witnessed by about 22,000 church followers and guests gathered at the church's CheongShim Peace World Center in Gapyeong, about 75 km (50 miles) northeast of Seoul. The couples included 1,000 who were newlywed and about 2,000 who were already married and seeking to re-dedicate their marriages and families to God as they had married before joining the church.

"We've been engaged for over one year now, mostly been separated, so of course it's extremely good to be together again," said Hyo-joo

Song, from Britain, who married his Japanese wife yesterday.

"And yes, we're happy to be married and also share that experience with many other people." Moon was

a lightning rod for controversy and was once jailed in the United States for tax evasion. He also declared in 1992 that he and his wife were messiahs. Critics over the years have

called the organization a cult, questioning its finances and how it indoctrinates followers, who are sometimes derogatorily known as "Moonies." — Reuters



GAPYEONG: Couples from around the world celebrate in a mass wedding ceremony at the Cheong Shim Peace World Center in Gapyeong yesterday. — AP