

## ASIA MOST EXPOSED TO DISASTERS, AFRICA MOST VULNERABLE: STUDY

**PARIS:** Countries and mega-cities across Asia are highly exposed to natural hazards ranging from cyclones to earthquakes, but people in sub-Saharan Africa are more vulnerable, according to a report released yesterday. Nearly 1.4 billion people in South Asia-India, Bangladesh, Pakistan-face at least one major threat from Nature, especially flooding, severe storms boosted by rising seas, and quakes. In the case of Bangladesh, 100 percent of its population is exposed, compared to 82 percent for India and 70 percent in Pakistan.

China, Indonesia, Japan and the Philippines are also among the nations with the largest numbers of people in harm's way. The United States, Mexico and Brazil round out the top ten. When it comes to vulnerability, however, Africa is the continent where people are most likely to suffer injury, disease and death as a result of natural disasters, according to the Natural Hazards Vulnerability Index from risk analysts Verisk Maplecroft. The capacity to cope with disaster can determine whether a high-magnitude earthquake, for example, will cause hundreds of deaths, as happened in Chile in 2010, or hundreds of thousands, as befell Haiti in the same year.

Nine out of ten countries ranked as most vulnerable to natural hazards in the index are in sub-Saharan Africa, and 23 of 25 are on the continent. South Sudan-plagued by drought and war-heads the list of the countries most defenseless against disaster, followed by Burundi, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Chad, Niger, Sudan, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo. "The frequency and magnitude of natural hazard events cannot be controlled," the report noted. "But the development and implementation of disaster risk reduction strategies can help minimize the humanitarian and economic impacts."

Among mega-cities, Manila-facing a triple threat from cyclones, superstorms and earthquakes-tops the list of urban areas with the highest number of people exposed. Tokyo and Jakarta and in second and third place, with Dongguan in southern China, Dhaka and Kolkata following close behind. Mexico City, Delhi and Sao Paulo all have huge populations exposed to major storms. "This analysis shows that governance is key to lower vulnerability," the report said. Without major reforms and political stability, "countries such as India and the Philippines are unlikely to see improvements in the near term."—AFP

## VIETNAM SLAMS 'ILLEGAL' TAIWAN SPRATLYS TOUR

**HANOI:** Vietnam yesterday hit back at Taiwan for taking international media on a tour of a disputed island in the South China Sea, saying the "illegal and worthless" trip had further raised tensions in the hotly contested waters. Taiwanese officials on Wednesday took journalists to Taiping, the largest island in the Spratlys chain, which it controls and views as part of its territory. The Spratlys are also claimed in part or whole by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei and have been at the center of escalating rows.

"Taiwan, despite concerns and objections from Vietnam and the international community, sent journalists to Taiping Island," Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh said in a statement. "This is a serious violation of Vietnam's sovereignty, escalates tensions and is not conducive to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea." A visit to Taiping by Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou in January triggered criticism from the United States which described it as "extremely unhelpful", as well as protests from Vietnam and the Philippines. The Philippines is currently in the midst of an arbitration case against China at the Hague over the South China Sea. A ruling on the case is expected before May. As part of its case, the Philippines argues that Taiping and other islands are just "rocks", a categorization which helps its broad claims in the area. Taiwan disagrees, saying Taiping is a fully fledged island, a designation which entitles it to a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. On Wednesday, journalists were shown facilities including a hospital, post office and temple, as well as visiting a monument engraved with the words "Taiping Island" during the three-hour visit. "Any activities by foreigners carried on the two island chains and not approved by Vietnam are illegal and worthless," Binh added. Rival claimants in the South China Sea have been beefing up their military presence in the disputed region, and other countries have complained China is becoming increasingly aggressive in pressing its case.—AFP



**BEIJING:** File photo shows Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks during the opening ceremony of Sino-German Youth Friendly Exchange Year at the Great Hall of the People.—AFP

## MEDIA STAFF DETAINED AFTER XI 'RESIGN' CALL

'FOR THE PARTY CAUSE AND YOUR PERSONAL SAFETY WE ASK YOU TO RESIGN'

**BEIJING:** Four staff of a Chinese media outlet that carried an anonymous letter calling on President Xi Jinping to resign have been missing for over a week, a colleague said yesterday. A letter appeared on the Wujie News website earlier this month accusing Xi of a litany of policy mistakes and asking him to step down for the good of the country, before it was deleted.

Media criticism of top leaders is almost unknown in China, where the press is strictly controlled by the ruling Communist Party. Four staff including CEO Ouyang Hongliang and managing editor Huang Zhijie have been "out of contact" since last week, a reporter at the magazine who asked not to be named said. "I think they are assisting an investigation," said the staffer, adding that the media outlet may be shut down, although the letter's appearance was probably the result of a "hacking attack".

A Chinese journalist, Jia Jia, was held last week at Beijing airport while on his way to Hong Kong, with rights groups linking his detention to an alleged attempt to warn Wujie's CEO about the letter. But his lawyer has said that his detention may not be connected to the document. Wujie has not published any original articles on its website since Wednesday last week, and has not updated an account on the Wechat social media platform since Friday. Xi has tightened already strict controls on the media since coming to power in 2012, and recently urged state-run outlets to "reflect the will of the party".

### 'Personal safety'

Mainland Chinese media coverage of Xi is typically limited to accounts of meetings or speeches, or gushing with praise. He has presided over a slowdown in economic growth and a clampdown on civil society that has seen hundreds of people

arrested. The letter, seen by AFP in a cached form, berated him for centralizing authority, mishandling the economy and tightening ideological controls.

"Due to your gathering of all power into your own hands and making decisions directly, we are now facing unprecedented problems and crises in all political, economic, ideological, and cultural spheres," it said. Signed "Loyal Communist Party Members", it added: "For the Party cause, for the long-term peace and stability of the country, and for your own per-

sonal safety and that of your family, we ask you to resign from all positions of Party and state leadership." Wujie-known as Watching in English-was founded in 2015 with funding from Internet giant Alibaba, as well as the provincial government of Xinjiang in China's northwest. It is based in Beijing. Police in China's capital did not answer a phone call asking for comment. Hong Kong newspaper Apple Daily on Thursday first reported that four staff were missing and added that the outlet was "facing closure".—AFP

## 'MISSING' BOOKSELLER LEE BO RETURNED TO HONG KONG

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong bookseller Lee Bo who disappeared from the city and surfaced in mainland China has returned, police said yesterday, the latest twist in a case that has provoked anger over China's interference in the city. British citizen Lee is one of five Hong Kong booksellers known to go "missing" in recent months-the other four are now under criminal investigation on the mainland. The men all worked for the Mighty Current publishing house in Hong Kong, which produced salacious titles about political intrigue and love affairs at the highest levels of Chinese politics.

Lee's case caused the greatest outcry because he disappeared from Hong Kong, prompting accusations that Chinese law enforcement agents were operating in the semi-autonomous city, which is illegal under its constitution. The other four booksellers went missing from Thailand or southern mainland China. "Immigration department and police met and took statement separately with Lee Bo, who had returned to

Hong Kong from the mainland this afternoon," a government statement released late yesterday said.

Lee had been handed over to immigration officials at the Lok Ma Chau border point in northern Hong Kong, the statement said. Lee, 65, was last seen at a Hong Kong book warehouse before his disappearance, but spoke publicly for the first time on Chinese television late last month saying he had gone to the mainland of his own accord.

Britain however had said in February it believed he had been "involuntarily removed to the mainland" in what it described as a "serious breach" of an agreement signed with Beijing before Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997, a deal that protects Hong Kong's freedoms for 50 years. That earned the ire of Beijing, which blasted Britain for interfering in its domestic affairs. Yesterday's government statement again insisted Lee had "returned to the mainland by his own means voluntarily and it was not an abduction".—AFP