

International

Monsoon batters South Asia; 14 killed in building collapse

Floods, landslides cause wreak deadly havoc

NEW DELHI: Fourteen people were killed when a building collapsed in northern India following heavy monsoon rains which have left more than 130 dead across South Asia, officials said yesterday. Floods and landslides caused by the annual deluge have wreaked deadly havoc from the Himalayan foothills to low-lying camps housing Rohingya refugees, with officials warning tolls could rise as they scramble to reach affected communities.

In Bangladesh, at least 29 people died in the last week, including 18 hit by lightning and seven who drowned after their boat capsized in choppy waters in the Bay of Bengal. Another 10 died in overcrowded Rohingya refugee camps in the southeast of the country, and thousands of shanty homes were destroyed.

In the latest monsoon-related tragedy in India, a four-storey building on a hillside in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh collapsed, trapping those who had gathered for a party inside. The structure-located near the popular tourist destination of Shimla-came down on Sunday following days of torrential downpours. Rescue workers used heavy machinery to remove heaps of mangled steel and concrete from the muddled debris, and pulled 28 survivors from the rubble.

A statement from the state Chief Minister's office said 14 people died, all but one of whom were soldiers. One soldier pulled from the rubble said they had gathered for a party in the building's restaurant, "but suddenly the building shook and collapsed". Such incidents are common

across the region during the monsoon because dilapidated structures buckle under the weight of continuous rain. In neighboring Nepal, police said at least 67 have been killed in floods and landslides, while 30 more are missing.

Danger levels

The June to September monsoon causes widespread death and destruction across South Asia each year. In Pakistan-administered Kashmir, officials said at least 23 people were killed after heavy rain triggered flash floods and damaged more than 50 houses. Floods have also devastated much of the north-eastern Indian state of Assam where four people died on Sunday after being swept away by sudden torrents.

The state's Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO-recognized reserve and home to two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhinos, has also been seriously affected by the weather. In the eastern state of Bihar, five rivers were flowing over danger levels with more rain forecast over the next few days. The downpours have eased in Nepal but authorities still fear the death toll could rise, said police spokesman Bishwaraj Pokharel, who gave the latest number of dead and missing from floods and landslides.

"There are the challenges of resettlement of the displaced as many houses... have been swept away. We are also cautious about the risk of epidemics due to polluted water," Pokharel said. In Pakistan-administered Kashmir,

More than 130 killed across South Asia



NEELUM VALLEY: Pakistani Kashmiri walk along a damaged road following heavy monsoon rains in Neelum valley near the Line of Control in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir yesterday. — AFP

officials also warned the death toll could increase as rescuers struggle to reach affected areas, and with the floods badly damaging communications. Meanwhile Delhi, which

has been grappling with hot and humid conditions, saw its dry spell broken yesterday as long-awaited rain and winds hit the Indian capital. — AFP

Key questions; flight MH17 remembered

THE HAGUE: Five years ago (tomorrow), Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was blasted out of the sky over war-torn eastern Ukraine with the loss of all 298 people on board. The shooting down of the Boeing 777 travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur has prompted sanctions against Russia, a series of international investigations and criminal charges. Here are five questions about the July 17, 2014 disaster:

What happened?

About three hours after take-off from Schiphol airport, MH17 disappeared off the radar screens as it passed over part of eastern Ukraine held by pro-Russian rebels, where conflict had been underway for months. Wreckage rained down on fields near the village of Grabovo, leaving the bodies of men women and children, some still strapped into their seats, strewn across local sunflower fields. Of the 283 passengers, 196 were Dutch and 38 Australian. There were 15 crew. The tragedy was the second in the space of a few months for Malaysia Airlines after the disappearance of flight MH370.

How did the world react?

The shooting down of MH17 sparked international outrage. Then-US president Barack Obama blamed a Russian-made BUK surface-to-air missile system and stressed that it was fired from territory controlled by separatists. Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko called it a "terrorist act". Moscow immediately disputed their claims and offered an array of competing theories, including that the Boeing was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet or a Ukrainian BUK. Western nations slapped stinging sanctions on Russia after the incident, toughening measures imposed after Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. The EU extended the sanctions last month, urging Russia to cooperate with the investigation.

What have investigations found?

Dutch-led investigations into the disaster over the past five years have meticulously narrowed down the cause of the disaster, and the culprits. The Dutch Safety Board said in September 2014 MH17 broke apart after being hit by numerous "high speed objects". In August 2015 it said it



GRABOVO: File photo shows part of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 at the crash site in the village of Grabovo (Grabovo), some 80km east of Donetsk. — AFP

had identified large fragments "probably" from a BUK surface-air-missile system, which is possessed by both Moscow and Kiev. In October of the same year it concluded that the plane was shot down by a missile fired from eastern Ukraine which exploded "outside the airplane against the left-hand side of the cockpit". A criminal Joint Investigation Team (JIT) of five countries led by the Dutch then took over the probe, and in September 2016 they said they had "irrefutable evidence" that a BUK missile was used and came from the "territory of the Russian Federation". In May 2018 investigators said for the first time that the missile originated from the 53rd Russian military brigade based in Kursk in western Russia. The Netherlands and Australia then said that they held Russia responsible for the shooting down of MH17.

Who has been charged?

The JIT on June 19 charged four people - Russians Igor

Grin, Sergei Dubinskiy and Oleg Pulatov, and Ukrainian Leonid Kharchenko - with murder. All are linked to the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine. They will be tried from March 9 next year in the Netherlands at a high-security courthouse near Schiphol Airport. However it is unlikely that any of the men will be present at the trial as neither Russia nor Ukraine allows its citizens to be extradited. Russian President Vladimir Putin said the probe showed "no proof" of Moscow's guilt.

What happens next?

The JIT has said it will investigate other suspects, particularly those in the "chain of command" of the BUK, and the four-member crew that operated the missile that downed MH17. Separately hundreds of relatives have asked the European Court of Human Rights based in Strasbourg to recognize Russia's responsibility for the crash. Russia has until late summer to respond. — AFP

Mass killing in PNG escalates tribal war

SYDNEY: Authorities in Papua New Guinea have boosted security to prevent a further escalation of tribal violence, officials said yesterday, after at least 24 people were killed in a troubled upland region earlier this month. The country's highland clans have fought each other for centuries, but last week's discovery of bodies, mostly belonging to women and children, marked a deadly departure from a cycle of killing in which the vulnerable are usually off limits.

PNG's new police minister Bryan Kramer said immediate intervention was needed in Hela province - a rugged region in the west of the country - to prevent the latest bout of violence becoming the new norm. "Last week's merciless killings has changed everything," Kramer said in a Facebook post on his return from the affected region. Kramer said the decades-old conflict between two tribes had spiraled following the murder of a tribesman in June, and led to the massacre of women and children which he described as "the worst pay back killing in our country's history".

A defense force platoon and a mobile police squad had been stationed at a local primary school "to provide around the clock security, to prevent any further escalation of violence", he added. Authorities would engage "drone tech-



HELA: Photo shows dead bodies lined up on a road in Hela province. — AFP

nology and satellite surveillance" to track down perpetrators who are believed to have fled the area, Kramer said. The incident has shocked both the nation and the recently appointed Prime Minister, James Marape, whose constituency includes the district where the killings occurred.

Marape has vowed to find the killers, and noted that the death penalty was "already a law". Alili Urr, who lost his wife, a child and nine other family members in the killings told local media he was not seeking revenge but wanted authorities to take action. "I'm calling on the provincial government to get all of us to a neutral area and ask why have these killings gone on like this?" he told the National newspaper. "We, the remaining 500 villagers, need to be relocated because we will not stay here," he added, fearing further violence. — AFP

Fake polio markers highlight the risks to Pakistan vaccination

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's polio eradication campaign has hit serious problems with an alarming spike in reported cases that has raised doubts over the quality of vaccination reporting and prompted officials to review their approach to stopping the crippling disease. The country is one of only three in the world where polio is endemic, along with neighboring Afghanistan and Nigeria, but vaccination campaigns have cut the disease sharply, with only a dozen cases last year compared with 306 in 2014 and more than 350,000 in 1988, according to Pakistani health officials.

However, there has been a worrying jump this year, with 41 cases recorded, 33 of them in the northwestern region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where many people resent what they see as intrusive and coercive vaccination campaigns often involving repeated rounds of visits, officials say. Just as alarming for health services, environmental sampling has shown the presence of the virus in areas across the country, a clear sign of gaps in vaccination, which must cover the entire population to be effective.

Hopes that transmission of the disease could be ended this year have been abandoned. "We need to take the bull by the horns and accept there are problems," said Babar Atta, Prime Minister Imran Khan's point person on polio eradication. As well as the difficulty in reaching very remote areas and keeping track of people moving through big cities like Karachi, there have been problems in collecting reliable data, exacerbated

by resistance to efforts to force vaccination. Efforts to eradicate the disease have for years been undermined by opposition from some Islamists, who say immunization is a foreign ploy to sterilize Muslim children or a cover for Western spies. Local officials say parents suspicious of mass immunization campaigns have been getting hold of special markers, used by health workers to put a colored spot on the little fingers of children who have been vaccinated.

"They themselves would mark the fingers of their children, in case of any official visit to countercheck the vaccinated children," one official associated with an international organization told Reuters in the northwestern city of Peshawar. Officials estimate that so-called fake finger marking, sometimes in collusion with health workers, is hiding the true scale of refusal rates - and thus gaps in vaccination.

In some areas, as many as 8% of families may be refusing or avoiding vaccination, a level which would mean the disease is not eradicated. A senior official of the Health Department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said the exact data had been deliberately hidden by local health authorities nervous of being blamed for failing to ensure full coverage. "And the result of hiding figures had led us to face an epidemic-like situation today," he said. Polio, a disease transmitted through sewage which can cause crippling paralysis particularly in young children, is incurable and remains a threat to human health as long as it has not been eradicated. — Reuters

'They bombed our livelihoods': Lanka tourism struggles

UNWATUNA: Pearl Divers, a diving school on one of Sri Lanka's most popular southern beaches, shut shop for two months after suicide bombers attacked churches and hotels on the island on Easter Sunday, killing about 250 people. It had no customers as tourists cancelled holidays, and its manager Nuwan Harshana says he took two months leave and a pay cut.

Last week, he dusted off the diving equipment and boats, used to carry scuba enthusiasts off the shore of Unawatuna beach, in the hope that foreigners will start to trickle into the country again and the shop can slowly build back to the \$800 a day in revenue it made before the attacks. But there is no sign of any quick upturn in his fortunes.

"Everything was good before April. Now that situation is finished ... there are no customers," said Harshana, who said he is worried about earning enough to look after his wife and two children, while also meeting his monthly loan payments. The economy of Sri Lanka, a sun-drenched island in the Indian Ocean, depends heavily on the \$4.4 billion tourism industry. Small businesses like Pearl Divers have been on the rise since the nation's civil war ended in 2009 and tourists poured in.

But after the bombings in April, tourist arrivals slumped 70% in May and 57% in June from a year earlier. Many small businesses, that employ thousands, are now either forced to lay off staff or have them work for minimal pay. This is already having a domino effect on the economy, further hitting consumer demand. The government has introduced a series of measures to boost tourism, including lowering airport charges, cutting taxes on jet fuel and pushing hotels to offer discounts. It is planning to relax visa rules for residents of a number of countries.

It has also asked banks to lower lending rates and give loan moratoriums. But the relief is yet to reach many small businesses that make up the backbone of the economy. "Clearly it took banks a bit of time to gear up for it ... As they had to work out the decision making process," central bank governor Indrajit Coomaraswamy said on Thursday.

Dilum Ranjana, who owns a foot spa in the fort city of Galle in the south, said he had to fire three of seven employees and postpone plans to open a second branch because he was getting hardly any income in the past couple of months. "It is not easy to get a loan, there is a lot of paperwork and bureaucracy," said Ranjana, who has monthly expenses of \$2,300 in rent, bills and salaries. He said he has so far made \$570 in July, a tenth of what he did last year. "All my plans are lost, they are ruined," he said.

Rising bad loans

Tourism was the third largest and fastest growing source of foreign currency for Sri Lanka last year, and accounted for 4.9 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018. The government expects a shortfall of \$800-900 million in tourism revenue this year, which will widen its current account deficit to 3% of GDP from the 2.3% it had earlier expected, a top central bank official said. The central bank has also slashed its growth forecast for the year to 3% from 4% earlier. "The main concern is rising non-performing loans due to sluggish economic growth after the attacks," the official said.

When the diving business was booming, Harshana said he took a loan of \$57,000 in 2017 to convert an old house into a no-frills hostel which earned him \$114 a night from tourists in peak season. It is currently closed because he has no bookings.

After letting him postpone loan payments of \$630 for both May and June, the bank is giving no such concession for July, he said. "I have to manage with my savings but I don't have much. People like us, we rise slowly but the fall is sudden," he said. The island received 2.5 million foreign tourists last year and with Lonely Planet magazine endorsing it as 2019's top destination, the government was hoping to draw in more than 3 million this year. — Reuters