

International

15 die in dam collapse at illegal Siberian gold mine

Authorities were not aware of the mine's existence

MOSCOW: Fifteen people were killed and another six still missing after an illegally built dam collapsed at a gold mine in a remote Siberian settlement on Saturday, in the latest deadly accident to hit Russia. The dam on the Seiba River in the Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk burst and flooded several cabins where more than 70 workers lived, Russian authorities said.

Icy and muddy floodwaters hit the cabins located near the village of Shchetinkino at around 6:00 am as the workers were resting. About 300 people, six helicopters and six boats were involved in a search and rescue mission but the operation was to be suspended for the night, officials said. Officials said the dam had been built in breach of safety rules and claimed that the authorities were not aware of its existence.

President Vladimir Putin ordered officials to provide assistance to the victims and identify the reasons for the accident, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. Investigators said they have opened a criminal probe into a breach of safety rules. Six people were still missing, Alyona Aleksishina, spokeswoman for the regional branch of the emergencies ministry, told AFP. A total of 16 victims received medical aid, and four of them were airlifted to a regional hospital, authorities said.

A team of doctors including a neurosurgeon were dispatched to the scene from the city of Krasnoyarsk, which is located some 4,000 kilometers east of Moscow. Footage broadcast on national television showed the remote settlement surrounded by the woods and mountains, the ground

covered in light snow. Overall, about 180 workers were thought to be living at the remote mining site.

Violation of 'every single norm'

An unidentified worker from the mine told Govort Moskva, a Moscow-based radio station, that people had been caught by surprise. "People were sleeping, apparently they did not even understand anything," he said. He described the accommodation as hastily built cabins, adding: "That says it all." The worker said there were four such dams in the area that had been built more than three years ago, adding that smaller breaches had happened in the past.

The dam was built in violation of "every single norm," the head of the local government, Yury Lapshin, said in televised remarks. Rains could have eroded the dam, officials said. The Krasnoyarsk region will observe a day of mourning on Monday. A number of top regional officials including governor Alexander Uss, prosecutors and inspectors went to the scene of the tragedy.

Russian Health Minister Veronika Skvortsova was overseeing the delivery of aid to the injured. The dam belonged to the Sibzoloto holding company which has not released any comment on the incident so far. Deadly accidents are relatively common in Russia because of lax safety rules, bad management and Soviet-era infrastructure. In 2009, 75 people were killed in a massive flood at Russia's biggest hydroelectric plant in the Khakassia region of Siberia. — AFP



This handout picture released by the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry yesterday, shows a flooding after a dam failure in a gold miners village close to the town of Shchetinkino. — AFP

N Macedonia PM calls for snap election after EU snub

SKOPJE: North Macedonia's prime minister yesterday called for an early election after the EU decided against membership talks for the Balkan state, denying his administration a key policy success. After hours of heated wrangling, European Union leaders on Friday could not agree on starting Skopje's accession negotiations, chiefly because of opposition from France. The issue is now on hold until next spring.

The move triggered a wave of anger and disappointment, not just in North Macedonia and Albania — whose bid was also put on hold — but among EU officials and leaders who had lobbied hard to open the talks. "We are victims of the EU's historic mistake," Zaev said in a televised address, echoing the words of European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker a day earlier, who appeared deeply apologetic for the decision.

"This is what I'm proposing: organizing quick snap elections where you, citizens, will decide the road we are going to take," Zaev said, adding that he would meet with



SKOPJE: Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev gives a press conference. — AFP

the president and other political leaders today to discuss the next steps. "I have no date, all options are open, we will agree on that all together," he added.

'Give me a mandate'

In his address, Zaev said he shared the "anger and disappointment" of the people. But he asked them to give him another chance to keep fighting for the membership bid. "I love my country, so I am asking people to give me a man-

date to continue along this path." "We seek to be in EU not in order to be in Europe, because we are already a part of the continent, but for the values. We should not be discouraged," he added.

A Social Democrat, Zaev came to power in 2017, ousting the right-wing party of former strongman Nikola Gruevski who had been in power for a decade. Since then, his government has poured all of its political capital into putting North Macedonia on a path to EU membership. That included embarking on a complicated and politically risky effort to change his country's name — which was previously Macedonia — to resolve a long-running row with Greece which had been seen as the major stumbling block for any future EU integration.

Brussels had pushed hard for the name change and promised the Balkan state would be rewarded. Apart from France, all the other EU states accepted that North Macedonia had made enough progress on reforms to start talks. But French President Emmanuel Macron refused to budge from his position that the entire accession process must first be reformed before taking in new members. The failure to follow through is now "disastrous" for the EU's credibility in the Western Balkans region, said James Ker-Lindsay, a Balkans expert at the London School of Economics. Zaev's government had "staked its whole reputation on settling the name issue in return for EU talks," he said. — AFP

Ousted Communist leader Zhao Ziyang is buried: Family

BEIJING: A former Chinese Communist Party leader ousted after he opposed the use of force to quell 1989 democracy protests was buried over a decade after he died, his family said, in a service ignored by state media. Zhao Ziyang, who is a revered figure among Chinese human rights defenders, is still a sensitive topic in the country, where commemorations of his death are held under tight surveillance or prevented altogether.

There was no mention of his burial ceremony Friday on state media, and searching for his name on social media returned no results. It took 14 years for his family to lay Zhao to rest after his death on January 17, 2005 at the age of 85. "Today, we have found solace," Wang Zhihua, Zhao's son-in-law, told AFP by phone. "After so many years and our persistence, we truly have found solace," he said, declining to elaborate on why it took so long to arrange the burial of his father-in-law's ashes.

The burial ceremony for Zhao and his wife, Liang Boqi, took place Friday afternoon at a Beijing cemetery on the outskirts of the city. A day after the burial service, the Changping cemetery, about 60 kilometers north west of downtown Beijing, was quiet and deserted. An AFP reporter who visited the site saw two guards in uniform and four other people in civilian clothes watching Zhao's tomb. Despite the heavy security, three people were seen paying their respects with one bowing three times in front of the simple grey headstone, as per traditional Chinese custom. Flowers had also been placed next to the grave.

Pictures of Zhao and Liang were placed on stands at the site during yesterday's burial, according to photos published by the South China Morning Post and the BBC. But these photos had been removed a day later. The guards blocked attempts by AFP journalists to take photos or videos at the site. Zhao was not laid to rest at the Baobashan Cemetery as was customary for revolutionary heroes and Communist Party luminaries.

Attendance at Friday's burial was limited to "just family and relatives," Wang said, estimating that about 20 people or fewer attended the ceremony, though others joined later. Zhao's opposition to using deadly military force to crack down on democracy protests in Tiananmen Square came at a high cost — the former premier and Communist Party general secretary was sacked and lived under house arrest for 16 years until his death. Zhao opposed Deng Xiaoping's imposition of martial law in 1989, when hundreds of unarmed civilians — by some estimates, more than 1,000 — were killed on June 4, a move for which he has frequently been criticized. He has however drawn acclaim for carrying out economic reforms in the 1980s that created opportunities for many people. — AFP

Sudan peace talks resume after deadlock

JUBA: Peace talks between the Sudanese government and rebels resumed Friday in neighboring South Sudan after a rocky start saw one of the main groups threaten to pull out, accusing government forces of bombing its territory. Officials from all sides said that Khartoum, and the two umbrella groups of rebels it is negotiating with, have managed to pin down a partial agenda for discussions. Mohammed Hassan Alteishi, spokesman for the Sudanese government delegation, told journalists that parties would start discussions on "political issues... humanitarian issues, and security arrangements."

The talks between the new government in Khartoum and rebels who fought now-ousted president Omar Al-Bashir's forces in Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan states, are being mediated by South Sudan — a former foe still struggling to end its own war. They were launched on Monday by South Sudan's President Salva Kiir — who volunteered to mediate — backed by regional leaders including Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. However the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N) on Wednesday threatened to pull out unless the government withdrew from an area in the Nuba mountains where it said government attacks were ongoing.

Hours later Khartoum announced a "permanent ceasefire" in the three conflict zones. An unofficial ceasefire had been in place since Bashir was ousted by the army in April in a palace coup following nationwide protests against his decades-old rule. SPLM-N secretary general Amar Amon agreed Thursday to return to the negotiating table. "We have been following the situation on the ground and we have seen the government of Khartoum made some steps which we regarded as positive towards addressing all those issues," he said, adding that some work remained to be done.

The rebel group's spokesman described the initial agreement on agenda points as "a great achievement". In a separate development, a key rebel group that fought government forces in war-torn Darfur, the Sudanese Liberation Army-Abdel Wahid Nur (SLA/AW), said that Khartoum had released 24 of its "war prisoners" on Friday. "The SLA/AW welcomes Sudan government's decision to release 24 war prisoners from Port Sudan and Khartoum prisons," the group said in a statement.

The group is not part of the talks in Juba and has so far not recognized Khartoum's government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok tasked with leading Sudan's transition to civilian rule after the ouster of Bashir. In July, Sudan's then-ruling military council that had seized power after ousting Bashir said it would release political detainees and prisoners of war. — AFP



MAPUTO: In this file photo taken on August 6, 2019 Mozambique's President Filipe Nyusi (C-L) and RENAMO (Mozambican National Resistance) leader Ossufo Momade (C-R) hug each other after signing a ceasefire agreement. — AFP

Mozambique's Renamo calls for election to be annulled

MAPUTO: Mozambique's main opposition party Renamo yesterday called for this week's election to be annulled, accusing the government of breaching a peace deal by using violence and intimidation on voting day. Partial results from Tuesday's election show President Filipe Nyusi and his ruling Frelimo party headed for a major victory but the poll was marred by claims of fraud and irregularities.

Renamo accused Frelimo of violating a "cessation of hostilities agreement" under the August peace deal which states no party should "commit acts of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political objectives". The party said some of its delegates were arrested after they caught poll organizers handing out more than one Frelimo ballot paper to voters. "There were arbitrary arrests of agents... and voters who tried to complain about anything, ballot box stuffing, being unable to exercise the right to vote," Renamo said in a statement.

It called for a cancellation of the vote and asked for "new elections that must be supervised by reputable entities". Government officials were not immediately

available for comment. The vote was seen as a test of the fragile peace deal between Frelimo and Renamo, a former rebel group. The two sides fought a brutal civil war from 1975-1992, devastating the economy and leaving almost one million people dead. They picked up arms again from 2013 to 2016, although tensions continued until the peace deal was sealed.

'Lack of rigor'

As part of the accord, Frelimo had also agreed to allow voters to elect governors for the country's 10 provinces. Renamo had been tipped to win control of at least three of those provinces, but partial results have cast doubt on that prediction. While most international observers agreed the vote was relatively well conducted, the opposition has decried fraud since the start of campaigning.

Civil society groups have said they found evidence of suspected election rigging, including several attempts to stuff ballots and election observers being kicked out of polling stations. Before the vote, the groups estimated there were hundreds of thousands of "ghost voters" — names not aligned with real voters — on the electoral roll. The US embassy in Mozambique's capital Maputo echoed their claims by noting a "lack of rigor" in the vote counting process.

The National Electoral Commission (CNE) is expected to announce the result of the provincial elections on Monday, and final results within 15 days of the vote. Frelimo — which has ruled the southern African nation since independence from Portugal in 1975 — is widely expected to win the presidential, parliamentary and provincial polls. — AFP

Rise in trafficking of Ivorian women, girls to Europe

ROME: An increasing number of women and girls from Ivory Coast are being trafficked to Northern Africa and Europe, the International Organization for Migration warned Friday. Anti-trafficking teams have noted a rise in the numbers making the Mediterranean crossing, along with a rise in pleas for help at landing points in Italy. IOM said in a note to mark European Anti-Trafficking Day.

The women and girls are often destined for lives of slavery or prostitution, said Laurence Hart, head of the Mediterranean coordination office. "Many are recruited in their country with the promise of being given employment as maids or waitresses and become, instead, victims of domestic servitude upon arriving in Tunisia or Libya," he said. There they are "subjected to sexual abuse, mistreatment, violence and deprivation of personal freedom".

They are then often preyed upon a second time by smugglers who "intend on exploiting them upon their arrival to Italy, or other countries of the European Union," he said. While there has been a drop in the total number of Ivorian migrants arriving by sea in Italy, the percentage of women and girls involved has risen, IOM said. They made up just eight percent of the total number of Ivorians who landed in 2015 — before jumping to 46 percent in 2019, it said. "Behind the numbers, there are many tragic stories, of which we often know too little," Hart said. — AFP