

International

Japan rescuers battle to reach thousands trapped by floods

Catastrophic flooding, landslides kill dozens

KUMA: Japanese emergency services and troops scrambled yesterday to reach thousands of homes cut off by catastrophic flooding and landslides that have killed dozens and caused widespread damage. Japan's Fire and Disaster Management Agency said rising floodwater or roads damaged by landslides had blocked access to more than 3,000 households, mostly in the hardest-hit southwestern region of Kumamoto where fresh downpours were forecast. An AFP reporter in the cut-off village of Kuma saw parts of the road collapsed into the river and scenes of devastation in flood-affected houses. In one home, an elderly man was struggling to clear up the debris and furniture littering the mud-caked floor, his traditional straw tatami mats in one room ruined.

The rain front started in the southwest in the early hours of Saturday and has since cut a swathe of destruction across Japan, dumping record amounts of rain and causing swollen rivers to break their banks. Japan's Meteorological Agency (JMA) said "heavy rain will likely continue at least until July 12 in a wide area" of the country, calling for "extreme vigilance" on landslide risks and flooding in low-lying areas. The JMA issued its second-highest evacuation order to more than 450,000 people. However, such orders are not compulsory and most residents are choosing not to go to shelters, possibly due to coronavirus fears.

The death toll has climbed gradually as more victims are discovered in isolated areas. Government spokesman Yoshihide Suga told reporters that 58 people had been confirmed dead, with a further four feared to have lost their lives. Suga said authorities were investigating whether four other deaths were linked to the floods, adding that 17 people were missing and a dozen injured. After five days blocked by floodwater and landslides, troops finally managed to rescue some 40 residents in the village of Ashikita in Kumamoto region.

Kinuyo Nakamura, 68, burst into tears of relief as she finally made it to an evacuation centre. "Gosh, it was scary. My house, it's such a mess, I cannot live there anymore," she said as she came across someone she knew at the shelter. "We have experienced flooding disasters in the past many times. But this one doesn't compare. Rather than being afraid, I was just focused on escaping," she told public broadcaster NHK. Nakamura choked up as she explained that one of her neighbors had fallen victim to the



KUMA, Japan: Workers survey the devastation following days of heavy rain and flooding in the village of Kuma, Kumamoto prefecture. —AFP

floods. "A truly, truly, fantastic person," she said, covering her face to hide the tears. "That was the hardest thing."

'Hesitating to offer help'

In many areas, landslides reduced houses to rubble and floodwater rushed into homes in low-lying areas, destroying the contents and rendering them uninhabitable. Japan has deployed at least 80,000 rescue workers to save lives with the aid of another 10,000 troops. The rains also lashed central Japan, with local official Ryoichi Miyamae telling AFP that nearly 4,000 people were cut off, mainly trapped in the cities of Gero and the tourist magnet of Takayama by the overflowing Hida River.

Complicating the rescue efforts, the coronavirus pandemic has claimed nearly 1,000 lives in Japan from more than 20,000 cases. The need to maintain social distancing has reduced capacity at

shelters and many have preferred to take refuge in their vehicles for fear of becoming infected. One emergency worker said the coronavirus might be dissuading people from volunteering to help with the rescue efforts. "A special characteristic of this disaster I felt was not people hesitating to evacuate, but people hesitating to offer help," one doctor said, according to NHK.

"In past disasters, by the fourth day, we would normally see relief efforts like people preparing meals. This time, I am yet to see anything like that." Regional authorities have asked potential volunteers from outside Kumamoto not to travel to the region, for fear of spreading the virus. Japan is in the middle of its annual rainy season and often sees damaging floods and landslides during this period that lasts several weeks. However, experts say climate change is intensifying the phenomenon because a warmer atmosphere holds more water to dump in the form of rain. — AFP

Myanmar attitudes undressed in textbook row

YANGON: Unchaperoned teens, gay partners and sex workers - fictional characters in a new curriculum for Myanmar schools are causing a real-world tussle over morality in a deeply conservative nation. In Myanmar, sex out of wedlock is illegal, teenage dating is frowned upon by censorious elders and same-sex relations are still officially illegal. Yet sex education is urgently needed, say advocates. Nearly 8,000 died in 2018 from AIDS-related diseases, the country has the second-highest maternal death rate in Asia after Afghanistan and women's rights group IPAS estimates around a quarter of a million unsafe abortions are undertaken every year.

Teenagers have only been taught sex ed since 2016, when the new government of Aung San Suu Kyi vowed to overhaul the country's outdated curriculum. But embarrassed teachers often sideline a subject tackling everything from periods and contraception to sexually-transmitted diseases. A new textbook for the coming academic year - slated to start in July - included scenarios such as teenagers feeling intimate over homework, a gay couple whose condom breaks, and a customer at a karaoke bar offering a waitress money for sex. Conservatives in the Buddhist-majority country were outraged.

"Is this a school textbook or a porno?" challenged Facebook user Aung Pho Min next to photos of the case studies aimed at 16 and 17-year-olds, triggering an online debate that snowballed. Monk Ashin Agga Dhama, once a member of the now banned hardline Buddhist group MaBaTha, waded in, branding the book "filth" that flew against the country's values. The ensuing online tit-for-tat saw a young

doctor, who accused the clergy of hypocrisy, attacked by a mob and later jailed for 21 months for insulting Buddhism. After "hearing the public's voice", the government announced it would review the curriculum - so, for now, all sex ed is shelved.

Tensions between conservatives and those open to new ideas have increased since the country started transitioning to democracy in 2010, said Rosalie Metro from the University of Missouri-Columbia. The curriculum has always been a place where "ideological struggle" plays out, added Metro, who has studied education in Myanmar for 20 years. Many online comments questioned whether the controversy had a political motive.

The Facebook account of Aung Phyo Min, the man who sparked the row, describes him as a member of the military-backed USDP opposition party. Elections, confirmed for November, will likely return Suu Kyi's ruling administration to power. But the USDP, after five years in the wilderness, aims to take a chunk from her ma-

majority and was quick to jump on the sex ed debate. The party condemned the classes as encouragement for premarital sex, child rape, and the "arousal of sexual desire" among children. The Ministry of Education denied this, telling reporters the curriculum had children's rights and interests at its core and had been carefully designed with expert advice.

All the teenagers AFP spoke to gave a resounding thumbs up to sex education classes, admitting they largely relied on Facebook and friends for information. "I've only read about it online so it would be really useful," said 16-year-old Yoon Shwe Bhon. Aye Myat Thandar, 14, agreed, saying she knew "underage people already having sex". Women usually have the most to lose. If single, an unplanned pregnancy can be devastating. They are often shunned by their family, school and community, with little chance of support from the father. "Anyone who objects to these classes doesn't live in reality," says NLD MP and campaigner Phyu Phyu Thin. — AFP