

International

Powerful cyclone buffets S India, pushing thousands into shelters

'The danger is not over yet,' authorities warn

PUDUCHERRY: A powerful cyclonic storm hurtled into India's southeastern coast yesterday, uprooting trees and packing strong winds and rains as tens of thousands of people took refuge in shelters. The centre of Nivar made landfall at 3:05 am local time near Puducherry with winds of up to 130 kilometers per hour. Thousands of state and national emergency personnel were deployed in the southern regions of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry as authorities suspended power supply across several cities to prevent damage to the electricity grid.

One woman in Tamil Nadu died after a boundary wall collapsed following heavy rains late Wednesday, local media reported. Initially classified as a "very severe cyclonic storm" as it swirled in the Bay of Bengal, Nivar weakened after landfall into a "severe cyclonic storm", the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said.

It is forecast to move north and further weaken over the next few hours, the weather bureau added. The danger "is not over yet as some part of the cyclone is still over the sea though center is over the land," the IMD tweeted. The fierce winds uprooted trees and toppled electricity pylons while downpours lashed parts of the region, causing flash floods. Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu recorded nearly 244 millimetres (9.6 inches) of rain since Wednesday morning, with a severe weather warning for further thunderstorms in place for the state.

Tamil Nadu minister R.B. Udhayakumar said late Wednesday that around 175,000 people were moved to shelters across the state as local authorities declared a public holiday Wednesday and Thursday, shutting everything except emergency services. Flight operations at Chennai airport were suspended until yesterday morning and metro train services halted. In Puducherry, home to 1.6 million people, the rain-soaked streets and markets were deserted and Lieutenant Governor Kiran Bedi appealed to locals to stay indoors and abide by authorities' instructions. "Move to high places wherever you have to. There are relief centres. Please move there," Bedi said in a video message on Twitter.

The navy said its ships, aircraft and crew were on standby to assist with disaster relief. But people in some pockets along the coast were reluctant to abandon their homes and fishing boats and move to government shelters. In Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai, authorities said they were also closely observing the level of reservoirs and lakes to avoid a repeat of 2015 flooding which killed several hundred people.

Lake Chembarambakkam outside Chennai discharged extra water because of the heavy rains amid warnings to residents in low-lying areas. No evacuation orders were issued in Sri Lanka but heavy rains were forecast, particularly in the north of the island nation. Fishermen there were advised



PUDUCHERRY: People wade along a waterlogged road after heavy rains following Cyclone Nivar landfall, in Puducherry yesterday. Accurate forecasting and the evacuation of several hundred thousand people helped avert any loss of life after a cyclone clobbered southeast India, authorities said on November 26, as rescuers worked to restore power and clear fallen trees. —AFP

not to go out to sea. More than 110 people died after "super cyclone" Amphan ravaged eastern India and Bangladesh in May, flattening villages, destroying farms and leaving millions without elec-

tricity. But the death toll was far lower than the many thousands killed in previous cyclones of that size, a result of improved weather forecasting and better response plans. —AFP

Paris train gunman says he was looking for US soldiers

PARIS: The Moroccan gunman on trial for an attempted terror attack on a Paris-bound train five years ago said Wednesday he had aimed at the heads of American soldiers but could not shoot. On August 21, 2015, after drinking a coffee at the station in Brussels, Ayoub El Khazzani told the court that he boarded the Amsterdam-Paris high-speed Thalys train concealing an AK-47 automatic rifle and 300 rounds of ammunition.

Speaking at his trial for the first time, he said he was under orders from Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who had travelled with him to Europe from war-torn Syria to guide the cell behind the deadly attacks in November 2015 in Paris and in March 2016 in the Belgian capital Brussels. "I took my seat. I started looking for the people he had spoken to me about, American soldiers, people from the European Commission. Honestly it was to kill them," the 31-year-old Khazzani told the court. He said he eventually located his American targets. The presiding judge asked him: "How did you recognize them?" "Abaaoud had told me they were young and burly, that they spoke English," Khazzani replied. —AFP

New Delhi's poisonous air a perennial crisis of its own making

NEW DELHI: Thousands of families who live near a smouldering waste landfill in a northern corner of India's capital have boarded up their doors and windows because they say the air outside is so toxic that they would be coughing all day. New Delhi has the worst air of any capital on the planet, according to IQ AirVisual, a Swiss-based group that gathers air quality data globally.

Jahangirpuri is one of its most polluted parts, choking daily in the murky mix of smoke from burning rubbish, exhaust fumes from trucks coming in and out a large depot and dust rising from unmetalled roads. "We're dying a slow death. But we can't think of going anywhere else because our work is here," said daily wage worker Naresh Yadav, a 33-year-old migrant worker from poverty stricken Bihar state.

This month, as winds dropped leaving pollutants trapped in the air, the levels of PM2.5, tiny particulate matter that is sucked deep into the lungs, have averaged 390 in Jahangirpuri - six times more than the amount deemed safe by the World Health Organization. Delhi has blamed farmers burning crop stubble in the neighboring states for its sickly air, and the federal capital's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said this week it was worsening the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

But, more than half the pollutants in Delhi's air are the result of vehicular emissions, toxic waste and smoke from the thousands of small unregulated industrial units and dust from the never-ending construction, according to a breakdown by environment groups. "Delhi cannot build a wall to prevent

polluted air coming from its surrounding states, but it has to check its own sources of pollution - be it dust, illegal industries, polluting factories, polluting vehicles or waste and biomass burning," said Vimlendu Jha, founder of environment group Swechha.

A ban on garbage burning is routinely flouted in the teeming Jahangirpuri neighborhood and there are illegal, small paint and dye shops operating from homes in the area polluting the air and water. On Wednesday, in the Ghazipur area, another mountainous waste landfill site, rising to over 60 meters (197 ft), caught fire, releasing poisonous smoke into the atmosphere. "We're facing breathing difficulties due to the smoke coming out from the landfill site that's been on fire since yesterday," said Vivek Shukla, 34, a resident.

Lack of officers

Across town, a small number of government environment officials sit in large office blocks surrounded by stacks of files and complain of being overburdened with paperwork. For a sprawling metropolis of 18 million, there are only 40 field staff to enforce environment standards. MP George, a scientist at the government's Delhi Pollution Control Committee told a webinar earlier this month that the capital's air monitoring systems were superior to some other heavily polluted cities. "But staff crunch is there, no doubt," George said. The Delhi government has now advertised for about 60 environmental scientists to strengthen its field staff, but recruitment is typically a slow process due to bureaucracy and a lack of resources.

Critics say Delhi's fight against pollution is ad-hoc and based on quick fixes. When the air quality plummets as happened soon after the Hindu festival of Diwali earlier this month, the city administration despatched fire trucks to spray water on the streets to stop dust from flying. Next, it hired contract workers to stand at hundreds of traffic intersections to persuade drivers to shut off their engines, saying it would help curb emissions. Few bothered. "These measures will not solve the problem," Jha said. "Pollution levels will start coming down only if policymakers start looking at the root causes of Delhi's toxic air." —Reuters