

International

# Desperate search for survivors after glacier disaster in India

## Death toll hits 31, 170 still missing

**TAPOVAN, India:** Indian rescue workers battled through tons of rock and mud yesterday searching for survivors in a choked Himalayan tunnel after a deadly flood—apparently triggered by a glacial burst—smashed through two mountain dam projects. More than 170 people were still missing, two days after a wall of water and debris hurtled down a valley in the northern state of Uttarakhand, destroying bridges and roads, hitting two hydroelectric power plants and killing 31.

The disaster has been blamed on rapidly melting glaciers in the Himalayan region caused by global warming. Building activity for dams and dredging riverbeds for sand and the clearing of trees for new roads—some to beef up defense on the Chinese border—are other factors.

Most of those missing were employees at two of the many hydro plants being built around Uttarakhand, home to soaring Himalayan peaks and the sources of the Ganges river. Hundreds of rescue workers were involved in the operation across the state, using helicopters equipped with surface-penetrating high-definition cameras, as well as sniffer dogs.

Yesterday the focus was attempting to locate and extract 34 workers who were in a network of tunnels when the 20-metre-high (70-foot) barrage of icy water and debris roared through on Sunday morning. Workers toiled all night and police official Banudutt Nair, in charge of the rescue operation, told AFP he believed that there were air pockets where the employees could still be alive.

“Forty-eight hours have passed and it has become a race against time. We hope they survive but there’s been no contact so far,” army rescuer Vivek Sahai said.

Giant floodlights lit up one entrance late Monday as a huge excavator slowly extracted the sludge which rescuers then sifted through. Nearby, workers used heavy machinery to remove giant boulders from the road blocking the way to the second power plant, Rishi Ganga, where 35 people were missing.

The plant was obliterated and is now a wasteland thickly coated with viscous grey mud. At a nearby village, four bodies were recovered yesterday including that of a policeman. Building projects criss-cross highly-seismic Uttarakhand state despite warnings from scientists about the impact on its ecologically fragile hills and valleys.

### ‘Don’t let go’

One of those who made it out was Rajesh Kumar, 28, who together with others clung to scaffolding rods in the tunnel for four hours before the water level fell and they were able to escape. “Suddenly there was a sound of whistling... there was shouting, people were telling us to come out. We thought it was a fire. We started running but the water gushed in. It was like a Hollywood movie,” Kumar told AFP.

“We just kept telling each other—come what may, we must not let go of the rods,” he said from his hospital bed. Shopkeeper Ramesh Negi was enjoying the Sunday morning sun when he heard a loud roar



Relatives load on a vehicle the body of a victim recovered from Raini village, outside a temporary morgue in Tapovan of Chamoli district yesterday following a flash flood thought to have been caused when a glacier burst on February 7. — AFP

and saw a huge wall of water smash into and sweep away a bridge.

Dozens of workers on the river bed and grazers leading their cattle along the mountain slopes disappeared beneath the sudden deluge, he recalled.

“There was dust and screams all over,” the 36-

year-old said. “We tried to alert the grazers but they were blown away by the wind pressure before being consumed by the water and slush. We can only guess what happened.” Mangra, another survivor, remembered hearing a loud, rumbling sound and the screams of other colleagues: “Run, run, run!” — AFP

## Myanmar police fire rubber bullets at protesters

**YANGON:** Security forces fired rubber bullets and tear gas at anti-coup protesters in Myanmar yesterday as demonstrators around the country defied a military ban on rallies.

Protests erupted for a fourth straight day against last week’s coup to oust civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, as international condemnation of the putsch grew. The rallies came despite a warning from the junta that it would take action against demonstrations that threatened “stability”, and a new ban on gatherings of more than five people.

In Naypyidaw, the remote capital purpose-built by the previous military regime, witnesses said police fired rubber bullets at protesters after earlier blasting them with water cannon.

“They fired warning shots to the sky two times, then they fired (at protesters) with rubber bullets,” a resident told AFP, adding that he saw some people injured. It remained unclear how many people were hurt, as a hospital in Naypyidaw would not

allow relatives in to see their family members, said Tun Wai, who rushed there when he heard his 23-year-old son was in the operation room.

“My son was shot when he tried to use the megaphone to ask people to protest peacefully after the police used water cannon to disperse them,” the 56-year-old goldsmith said.

“He got hit in the back... I’m very worried about him.” In Mandalay, the country’s second-biggest city, police fired tear gas to disperse protesters.

After watching hundreds of thousands of people rally in opposition to last week’s coup, junta chief General Min Aung Hlaing made a televised speech on Monday evening to justify seizing power.

The first of a series of bans on gatherings in protest hotspots was also announced on Monday, as was a nighttime curfew. But yesterday, fresh protests initially emerged in various parts of Yangon, including near the headquarters of Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD).



YANGON: A protester holds a sign calling for the release of detained Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi as they part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon yesterday. — AFP

The protesters carried placards some of which read “We want our leader”, in reference to Suu Kyi—who is currently detained by the military—and “No dictatorship”. In Yangon’s San Chaung township, scores of teachers marched on the main road, waving a defiant three-finger salute

that has become a signature gesture of the protesters.

“We are not worried about their warning. That’s why we came out today. We cannot accept their excuse of vote fraud. We do not want any military dictatorship,” teacher Thein Win Soe said. — AFP

## Four Afghanistan ministry staff killed in ambush

**KABUL:** Militants shot dead four government employees in central Kabul yesterday in the latest rush-hour violence to rock the Afghan capital. The city has seen near-daily attacks during the busy morning commute, targeting prominent Afghans including politicians, journalists, activists, judges, and religious scholars. Kabul police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters that gunmen opened fire on a vehicle carrying staff from the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, killing four of them.

A separate attack saw a civilian wounded when a bomb targeted another government vehicle, police said. Yesterday’s attacks came a day after three bomb blasts rattled the capital, killing at least one person. Afghan and US officials have blamed the Taliban for the wave of violence, although the group has rejected the charges. The surge comes as peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government that began in September are deadlocked.



Afghan security forces arrive at the site of a car bomb attack that targeted a security outpost in Khogyani district of Nangarhar province on Monday. — AFP

Government negotiators are pushing for a permanent ceasefire, but the insurgents have so far dismissed calls for a truce.

The rise in violence has led US President Joe

Biden’s administration to launch a review of a deal signed between Washington and Taliban last year that paved the way for the withdrawal of all American troops in coming months. — AFP

## India glacier disaster highlights pressure on Asia’s great rivers

**KUALA LUMPUR:** A glacial burst that triggered a deadly flash flood in the Indian Himalayas at the weekend was a disaster waiting to happen, and one likely to be repeated in a region transformed by climate change and unchecked infrastructure development, experts warn.

Asia is home to some of the world’s biggest waterways, from the Ganges and the Indus in India to the Yangtze and Mekong originating in China, that snake for thousands of kilometers. They support the livelihoods of vast numbers of farmers and fishermen, and supply drinking water to billions of people, but have come under unprecedented pressure in recent years.

Higher temperatures are causing glaciers that feed the rivers to shrink, threatening water supplies and also increasing the chances of landslides and

floods, while critics blame dam building and pollution for damaging fragile ecosystems. “Rivers are really at risk from development projects, dumping of solid waste and liquid waste, sand mining and stone mining,” Himanshu Thakkar, from the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, said.

“Climate change is a longer-term process that has already set in. The impacts are already happening. “So in every respect, rivers are under greater threat.” The disaster in India was apparently triggered by a glacial burst, that unleashed a wall of water which barreled down a valley in Uttarakhand state, destroying bridges and roads and hitting two hydroelectric power plants.

### Shrinking glaciers

It is not yet clear what damaged the glacier and triggered the accident, but there are suspicions that construction of hydro-power projects in an area that is highly seismically active—may have contributed. “This area is prone to vulnerability, it is not appropriate for this kind of bumper-to-bumper hydro-power development,” Himanshu said. “Proper planning, impact assessment, proper geological assessment—this has not happened here.” Patricia

Adams, executive director from Canada-based environmental NGO Probe International, said dam building in such an area was simply too dangerous, as it makes hillsides unstable and causes landslides.

Some have also pointed to rising temperatures as a contributing factor. A major study in 2019 suggested Himalayan glaciers had melted twice as fast since the turn of the century as in the 25 preceding years. “The impacts of climate change in the Himalayas are real,” said Benjamin P. Horton, director of the Earth Observatory of Singapore.

As well as greater danger of accidents, glacier loss in the Himalayas deprives local communities of water to drink and for agriculture, he said.

There have been other flooding disasters in the region in recent years. In 2013, some 6,000 people died when flash floods and landslides swept away entire villages in Uttarakhand as rivers swollen by monsoon rains overflowed.

In neighboring China, flooding has also worsened on major rivers. Last year the Yangtze, Asia’s longest waterway, suffered record deluges that killed hundreds of people and submerged thousands of homes, with environmentalists saying it indicated climate change impacts were growing. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Greece facing third virus wave

**ATHENS:** Greece is facing a third coronavirus wave, the health minister said yesterday as officials met to discuss tighter lockdown rules. “The analysis I am receiving from experts... shows this third wave is coming to our country too,” Health Minister Vassilis Kikilias told Open TV, ahead of an emergency cabinet meeting on the pandemic. Greece was hit with a first wave of the virus in March last year before infections eased off, surging again in autumn prompting the government to re-impose a nationwide lockdown. In the greater Athens area, 71 percent of intensive care beds allotted for COVID patients were now occupied, the minister said. — AFP

#### Equatorial Guinea imposes curfew

**MALABO, Equatorial Guinea:** Equatorial Guinea yesterday said it would impose a curfew for the first time, limit flights and reintroduce other restrictions after cases of coronavirus rebounded in the West African country. The tiny state, ruled by 78-year-old President Teodoro Obiang Nguema for the past 41 years, scaled back a rigorously enforced range of restrictions in August. But bars, restaurants, discotheques, casinos and other “leisure sites” will once again be closed, according to a decree read on television yesterday. But places of worship, which were shut during the first wave last year, will remain open. — AFP

#### Two COVID tests for arrivals in UK

**LONDON:** Travellers arriving in Britain from abroad will have to take two coronavirus tests during quarantine, the government is expected to confirm yesterday. Health Secretary Matt Hancock is due to announce that people told to isolate at home will be required to get a test two and eight days into a mandatory 10-day quarantine period. The new measures, which critics say come too late to curb the spread of the virus, are aimed at halting new variants. But the health ministry said Britain’s response had been informed by experts leading to “some of the toughest border regimes in the world”. — AFP

#### Kidnapped Chinese freed in Nigeria

**LAGOS:** Nigerian police said yesterday they had freed three Chinese workers kidnapped last week from a gold-mining site in south-western Osun state. The Chinese were abducted and their police escort killed on February 1 following a dispute with local laborers at the mining site at the Atakumosa area of the state. “We have rescued the three Chinese expatriates. They were freed on Sunday,” state police spokeswoman Yemisi Opalola said. She said the foreigners who took ill while in captivity, were being given medical care. She said that no arrests had been made. — AFP

#### South China Sea patrol

**PARIS:** A French nuclear attack submarine was among two navy ships that recently conducted a patrol through the South China Sea, its defense minister announced, in a move likely to anger Beijing, which claims most of the strategic waters as its territory. The SNA Emeraude was accompanied by support ship BSAM Seine for the passage. Defence Minister Florence Parly said on Twitter late Monday. “This extraordinary patrol has just completed a passage in the South China Sea. — AFP