

## International

# At least 13 killed in Pakistan, Afghanistan strong earthquake

## Some 50 houses collapse in the village located in the snow-capped mountains

**JURM:** At least 13 people were killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by a strong earthquake felt across thousands of kilometres, but the region appeared Wednesday to have dodged the mass casualties usually associated with a tremor of such scale.

The United States Geological Survey said the magnitude 6.5 quake was centred near Jurm in northeastern Afghanistan, but the depth of 187 kilometres (116 miles) mitigated extensive damage. The quake, which struck around 09:30 pm (1700 GMT) Kabul time on Tuesday and lasted more than 30 seconds, was felt from central Asia to New Delhi in India—more than 2,000 kilometres away.

"It was a powerful earthquake and we feared maximum damage due to the intensity—that's why we issued an alert," Bilal Faizi, a spokesman for Pakistan's emergency Rescue 1122 service in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, told AFP.

"But fortunately our fears proved wrong. Residents panicked due to the magnitude of the earthquake, but the damage was minimal." The region is frequently hit by quakes—especially in the Hindu Kush mountain range, which lies near the junction of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates.

### 'Stayed awake' all night

In Jurm district, near the epicentre, a resident of one village reported no casualties despite the proximity. "We are about 2,000 to 3,000 people in our village, and we all spent the night outside under the sky," said Inamullah, reached by telephone.

"We were all scared and stayed awake the entire night." Some 50 houses had collapsed in the village located in the snow-capped mountains, an AFP cor-

respondent who arrived in the area reported. Panicked residents of cities and towns in Afghanistan and Pakistan also fled their homes to seek safety away from buildings—with many too scared to return. "We stayed the night in our courtyard... it was cold outside, but we preferred to stay out rather than go back," 24-year-old student Neda Raihan told AFP in Kabul. Khudadad Heights, a vast multi-storey residential block in the Pakistan capital, was evacuated after huge cracks appeared in the building.

More than 55,000 people were killed by an earthquake that struck southeastern Turkey and parts of Syria last month, heightening fears across the region. "The children started shouting that there is an earthquake. We all ran out. The horrors of the earthquake in Turkey and neighbouring countries had a strong effect on our nerves," said Ikhtlaq Kazmi, a retired professor in the Pakistani city of Rawalpindi. Officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, north of Islamabad, said nine people had been killed in the quake, including two women and two children.

### 'People screaming'

In Afghanistan, officials reported four dead, including a child, and 74 injured—but phone and internet links to remote parts of the country had been severed and communication was patchy. "When we were rushing out a wall of our house collapsed on the children. One lost her life," said Abdul Baseer, a resident of Laghman province.

Officials said about 150 houses were damaged in Laghman. In the Afghan capital Kabul, shopkeeper Noor Mohammad Hanifi set up tents in the street for his family to spend the night in. "Nobody dares to



**JURM, AFGHANISTAN:** Residents clear debris from a damaged house at Sookh village in Jurm district of Badkhashan Province on March 22, 2023, following an overnight earthquake. At least 13 people were killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by a strong earthquake felt across thousands of kilometres. — AFP

go inside their homes," Hanifi told AFP as his family, cloaked in blankets, took shelter.

In Afghanistan, many families were out of their homes celebrating Nowruz, the Persian New Year, when the quake struck. "I heard people screaming and yelling as they came out in the streets," said Masieh, who was outside with his family when the tremor hit. "It's possible that there could be another tremor so I'm still waiting outside," he said late on Tuesday. Those indoors also quickly left their houses and apartments. "They just fled without wearing shoes, just carrying their children in their hands," an AFP correspondent said.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif ordered the National Disaster Management Authority to be ready to deal with any emergency. Last June more than 1,000 people were killed and tens of thousands made homeless after a 5.9-magnitude quake—the deadliest in Afghanistan in nearly a quarter of a century—struck the impoverished province of Paktika.

Afghanistan is in the grips of a humanitarian disaster that deepened with the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021. International development funding on which the South Asian country relied dried up after the takeover and assets held abroad were frozen. — AFP

## Spain lawmakers reject far-right no-confidence motion

**MADRID:** Spanish lawmakers on Wednesday roundly rejected a no-confidence motion against socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez brought by the far-right Vox party and fronted by an 89-year-old former communist.

After nearly 14 hours of parliamentary debate which began early Tuesday, the motion was rejected with 201 votes against, to 53 in favour and 91 abstentions in the 350-seat chamber. It never had a chance of success given it was only supported by Vox's 52 MPs, although it secured one extra vote from an independent lawmaker.

As pledged, the right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP) abstained. The no-confidence move—which was defended by elderly economist Ramon Tamames, who does not belong to Vox—comes two months before local and regional polls in Spain on May 28 and ahead of a December general election.

"We will not vote in favour of this motion out of respect for the Spanish people, and we will not vote against this motion out of respect for you, Mr. Tamames," the PP's number two, Cuca Gamarra, told lawmakers ahead of the vote. An earlier Vox-led no-con-

fidence motion in October 2020 also failed but the PP had voted against, with Wednesday's decision to abstain drawing fierce criticism from Sanchez.

### Vying to govern

"It is remarkable and revealing to see the traditional right... getting closer and closer to the far-right," he said, accusing opposition leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo, who is not a lawmaker and did not attend the vote, of seeking to appease Vox ahead of the elections. "What does the absent leader of the traditional right say today in the face of history repeating itself? He is silent. But his silence says it all: they know they need Vox to be able to govern," Sanchez said. Vox became Spain's third-largest party when it entered parliament in 2019, and last year won its first share of power in one of Spain's regional governments alongside the PP.

It is a model the party is hoping to repeat with polls suggesting the PP would win December's election but would need Vox's support to govern. However, Vox's ultra-conservative stance, notably over abortion in recent months, has embarrassed the PP which has sought to distance itself from the faction.

Despite the motion's rejection, Vox leader Santiago Abascal said he was "satisfied". "Once again, we have exposed one of the worst governments in our history," he told reporters. "We knew what the outcome (of the vote) would be but above all we were satisfied with the debate, we wanted this government to be exposed and it was." — AFP



**UKHIA:** A Rohingya refugee child walks back to his makeshift shelter after collecting water at Hakimpara refugee camp in Bangladesh's Ukhia district. — AFP

## Rohingya sceptical of Myanmar refugee return offer

**COX BAZAR:** Rohingya refugees said Wednesday they doubted Myanmar was offering a genuine return to their homeland, as a spokesman for the country's military junta said it would begin welcoming back members of the persecuted minority as soon as next month. A delegation of 17 officials from Myanmar's junta was in Bangladesh this week to interview potential candidates for return, more than five years after a brutal military crackdown drove immense numbers of Rohingya out of their homes.

The visit, brokered by China and partly facilitated by the United Nations, jumpstarted a repatriation agreement between the two countries that has languished for years, partly over fears that the refugees would not be safe on their return. But Rohingya interviewed by the delegation told AFP that none of their queries about security or recognition of their right to citizenship in Myanmar had been answered.

"They used to treat us badly there. I asked whether we would be able to live a normal life there, but then they stopped me," Shamsun Nahar, a 40-year-old Rohingya woman, told AFP. "They did not want any more questions," she added. "I don't think they will take us to Myanmar. If they do, they won't give us any rights." The Myanmar delegation left Wednesday after a week in the sprawling refugee camps home to around a million Rohingya. Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun told AFP after their departure that Myanmar would likely begin

the repatriation process by mid-April and would welcome around 1,000 refugees at first. Myanmar's representatives were officially there to assess refugees for potential return, based partly on whether they could prove their residence in the country before the 2017 crackdown. But another refugee interviewed by the delegation said documentation proving his residency was treated with scepticism. "I provided all the documents, they said 'hmm'," Soyod Hossain, 50, told AFP. "I don't think they believe that our documents were genuine."

### 'Token' return

The Rohingya are widely viewed in Myanmar as interlopers from Bangladesh, despite roots in the country stretching back centuries, and are stateless after Myanmar ceased recognising their citizenship in 2015. Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, who has dismissed the Rohingya identity as "imaginary", was head of the armed forces during the 2017 crackdown. That year's violence is now subject to a genocide investigation, with the International Court of Justice probing allegations of rape, murder and arson against entire Rohingya villages by Myanmar's security forces.

The Arakan Rohingya National Alliance, a prominent Rohingya diaspora group, accused Myanmar last week of planning to orchestrate a "token" return of refugees to avoid the court's censure. The UN refugee agency said once again Sunday that conditions in Myanmar remained unsuitable for the "sustainable return" of Rohingya refugees. But civil society groups have criticised the agency for facilitating the transport of Myanmar officials into Bangladesh last week as part of the return scheme. A repatriation plan was first agreed upon soon after the 2017 crackdown but failed to make any significant headway.—AFP

gerian authorities have placed four people in pre-trial detention over the case, prosecutors said in February. A prominent figure in a 2014 protest movement against then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fourth term in office, Bouraoui was also involved in the Hirak protest movement which unseated him in 2019. She was sentenced in June 2020 to two years in prison before being granted provisional release the following month, but banned from leaving Algeria.

### 'Point of no return'

During the interview, Tebboune also addressed his country's relations with its regional rival Morocco, a year and a half after Algiers cut ties with Rabat, citing "hostile acts". "We regret to see relations between Algeria and Morocco get to this stage," he said. "They've reached a point of no return and our position was reactive." Algeria is deeply opposed to Morocco over Rabat's ties with and arms purchases from the Zionist entity, as well as over the Western Sahara dispute. Morocco occupies most of the former Spanish colony and sees it as part of its sovereign territory, but Algeria backs the Polisario movement which seeks independence there. Spanish premier Pedro Sanchez's government last year broke with decades of neutrality on the issue, declaring it now backed a Moroccan proposal for limited self-rule under Moroccan sovereignty.—AFP

## Algeria to return envoy to France after standoff

**ALGIERS:** Algeria will send its ambassador back to France soon, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said weeks after he withdrew the envoy following a diplomatic spat over a French-Algerian activist. Algiers withdrew its envoy in early February after accusing its former colonial ruler of helping activist Amira Bouraoui's "clandestine and illegal exfiltration" from Algeria to France after she was sentenced to two years in jail for "offending Islam" and for insulting the president. But in an interview with pan-Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera quoted by state news agency APS, Tebboune said its ambassador, Said Moussi, would "soon be back in Paris". "Our relationship with France is fluctuating," he said.

Algerian-French ties fell into crisis in late 2021 after controversial comments on Algerian history by French President Emmanuel Macron. But Macron visited the vast North African country last August, signing a joint declaration with Tebboune to relaunch bilateral cooperation. The Bouraoui affair has reignited tensions. Al-



**SIEM REAP:** Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni (2nd R) lights the torch with a candle lit from the sun's rays as Prime Minister Hun Sen (R) looks on during a ceremony prior to the 32nd SEA Games at Angkor Wat temple in Siem Reap province on March 21, 2023. — AFP

## Cambodian oppn activists charged with insulting king

**PHNOM PENH:** Two Cambodian opposition activists were charged with insulting the king and incitement Wednesday following Facebook posts the authorities deemed disrespectful to the monarch, according to court warrants.

Human rights activists had previously warned enactment of the 2018 lese majeste law, which carries a sentence of between one and five years in prison, could be wielded to target dissent. The two youth activists—Yim Sinorn and Hun Kosal—were arrested on Tuesday evening after posting allegedly insulting language against King Norodom Sihamoni on Facebook.

Yim Sinorn, a close aide to opposition leader Kem Sokha, posted "according to the voice of people from coffee shops, today we can clearly see who is the real King". Hun Kosal also posted that he would gather behind Kem Sokha to protect the monarch

and the throne after "seeing they mistreat the feeling and dishonour the Khmer King."

The activists wrote the posts after King Sihamoni, Prime Minister Hun Sen and senior government officials attended a live-televised ceremony at Angkor Wat temple on Tuesday morning to light the torch for the upcoming SEA Games in Cambodia.

In two separate warrants, seen by AFP, a judge on Wednesday night ordered the detention of the two activists "on charges of insulting the king and incitement to commit a serious unrest to social security". Speaking at a graduation ceremony on Wednesday morning, Hun Sen said the pair had "bad intention" and vowed he won't forgive anyone who insulted the king and himself.

"This is not a right to freedom of expression. This is an intentional slander that aims to destroy, to insult the king and to destroy the name of the prime minister," Hun Sen said. The pair also face up to two years in jail for the incitement charge.

Phil Robertson, Human Rights Watch's deputy Asia director, said the pair were detained "on fabricated, politically motivated charges". Earlier this month opposition leader Kem Sokha was sentenced to 27 years in jail and placed under house arrest for treason. Cambodia will go to polls in July. — AFP