Death toll in India monsoon rises to at least 127

The death toll from monsoon-related landslides and floods in India rose to 127 on Sunday, officials said, as the military helped rescue workers search for dozens still missing.

Rescue crews in India used boats and helicopters over the weekend to reach areas hammered by days of monsoon rains — coming at nearly an inch an hour at one weather station — that submerged homes and triggered landslides in the latest battle against extreme weather around the world.

Emergency teams confronted thick sludge and debris in attempts to evacuate people across hard-hit Maharashtra state, home to Mumbai. Thousands of trucks were stuck on the partly submerged highway between Mumbai and the technology hub of Bangalore on Saturday.

At least 113 people were killed in Maharashtra, officials said Sunday, and at least 100 people there were still missing. More than 130,000 people had been rescued from about 900 villages across the state as of Sunday, the Associated Press reported.

India deployed its military to assist in rescue efforts and provide medical aid to those affected by the floods and landslides. The Department of Military Affairs established a Central War Room to coordinate those efforts, an Indian Army account tweeted Sunday.

Photos and videos shared by the army on social media show soldiers helping marooned villagers in Maharashtra into wooden boats. In others, women lean on soldiers for support as they walk through the muddy water, and army personnel are pictured applying first aid to injured civilians.

The official flood forecaster for India's Central Water Commission on Sunday warned that states north of Maharashtra could see "isolated very heavy rainfall" in the coming days, and that some rivers remained at risk of rising further.

The scenes in India echoed disasters around the world caused by deadly floods in recent weeks in China's central Henan province and in Germany and Belgium.

Summer of floods: The climate connection behind deadly downpours around the world

Climate scientists say that these ravaging global floods should serve as a wake-up call for leaders to take action on climate change. While monsoon rains are a regular occurrence in India, a warmer atmosphere retains more moisture, which causes heavy rainfall during storms, some experts note.

"The rain fury that lashed Mahabaleshwar … is a strong warning against any more tampering with the ecologically fragile Western Ghats," Indian economist Devinder Sharma wrote on Twitter on Friday, referring to a chain of mountains running parallel to India's western coast.

Climate scientist Roxy Mathew Koll of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology told the Agence France-Presse news agency that climate change was causing the Arabian Sea to heat up, making the air above warmer and capable of holding more moisture.

The Maharashtra city of Kolhapur — which sits at the banks of one of the region's most important waterways, the Panchganga River — was almost totally submerged, Times of India drone footage showed on Saturday.

A landslide Thursday flattened most homes in the village of Taliye — 110 miles southeast of Mumbai — where the death toll reached at least 50, according to the Times of India. Dozens of people remained missing.

"The possibility of rescuing them alive is thin as they've been trapped in mud for more than 36 hours," Reuters quoted a government official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to speak with media, as saying.

"No advance disaster alert was given to the villagers," said Milind Gangawane, a Taliye resident interviewed by the Times of India. "Our tribal hamlet has 45 houses with a population of over 120. Boulders from the hill fell from a height of 100 feet in the landslide." The hill station of Mahabaleshwar, south of Mumbai, recorded its highest ever rainfall: 60 centimeters, or more than 23 inches, in 24 hours.

The chief minister of Maharashtra, Uddhav Thackeray, on Friday wrote on Twitter to the people of Taliye: "You have faced a major tragedy. Hence, right now, you just need to take care of yourself. Leave the rest to the Government.

We will ensure that everyone is rehabilitated and compensated for their losses."

Rain let up along the region's west coast and water levels of most of the area's west-flowing rivers had receded by Sunday, according to the India Meteorological Department.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote in a tweet Friday that he was "anguished by the loss of lives due to a landslide" in Maharashtra. "The situation in Maharashtra due to heavy rains is being closely monitored and assistance is being provided to the affected."

India's Minister of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Narayan Rane, and two opposition politicians toured the landslide-stricken village of Taliye on Sunday to inspect rescue efforts. He pledged central government help with rebuilding and said Modi had asked him to prepare a report on the site, the Times of India reported.

Asked how a "chain of tragedies" could have hit Maharashtra, Rane reportedly demurred.

"This is not the time to indulge in pointing fingers at anyone," he said, according to the Times of India. "Who could have ever thought that this hill would come crashing down like this. The topmost priority now is to assist the affected populace which has lost everything in the disaster."

But opposition politician D.K. Shivakumar criticized the Modi government's handling of the flooding and challenged the ruling party to hold fresh elections, according to the Press Trust of India.

Other parts of the world have also recently experienced extreme weather events — heat waves, wildfires and drought.

Authorities over the weekend advised citizens staying close to rivers to take precautions — but "alternate arrangements must be made" for sites with coronavirus patients, wrote Thackeray.

washingtonpost

Bangladesh: End crackdown on freedom of expression online

Bangladeshi authorities must end the crackdown on people's right to freedom of expression online and urgently repeal the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) unless it can be amended in compliance with international human rights law and standards, Amnesty International said in a new briefing released today.

The briefing, "No space for dissent" examines cases under the DSA - a law that contains overbroad and vague provisions granting the authorities extensive powers to police the online space - against 10 individuals who have been subjected to a wide range of human rights violations including enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture, simply for criticising powerful people on social media.

Bangladesh has at least 433 people imprisoned under the DSA as of July 2021, most of whom are held on allegations of publishing false and offensive information online.

Those targeted include journalists, cartoonists, musicians, activists, entrepreneurs, students and even a farmer who cannot read or write, among others. In one case, writer Mushtaq Ahmed died in prison after languishing there for 10 months without trial on accusations under the DSA. One inmate alleged that he was subjected to torture.

"The actions taken by the authorities under the purview of the DSA demonstrate just how dangerous it has become to speak out and voice dissenting views in Bangladesh today. These undue restrictions on different forms of expression have sent a chilling effect across Bangladeshi society and have severely curbed the space for independent media and civil society organizations. Bangladeshi authorities must release all prisoners held solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression," said Saad Hammadi, Amnesty International's South Asia Campaigner.

The DSA gives arbitrary powers to law enforcement agencies to conduct searches, seize devices and their contents, and arrest individuals without warrant simply for a comment they may have shared online, in violation of the right to freedom of expression enshrined under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Bangladesh is a party.

"We remind the Bangladeshi authorities about the recommendations they accepted from several UN member states during the country's last Universal Periodic Review in May 2018, with regards to taking concrete measures to bring all legislations including the DSA in conformity with the ICCPR," said Saad Hammadi.

Tool for repression

Introduced in October 2018, the DSA is increasingly being used to stifle dissent on social media, websites, and other digital platforms, with punishments that can extend to life imprisonment. The authorities have targeted critical voices under the pretext that they have made false, offensive, derogatory or defamatory statements online.

Even before its adoption, the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression and on the situation of human rights defenders raised concerns over the draft of the DSA. Several UN member states at Bangladesh's UPR recommended the government to amend the DSA "to ensure online freedom of expression". The government, despite accepting these recommendations, has so far failed to follow through on its promise and continues to crackdown on people's right to freedom of expression.

On 26 February 2021, rights activist Ruhul Amin was arrested for a Facebook post criticizing the Bangladeshi government and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for the death of Mushtaq Ahmed. He was subjected to intrusive questioning and imprisoned for 45 days before he was eventually released on bail.

Mushtaq Ahmed was arrested in May 2020 for criticising the Bangladeshi government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic on Facebook. Denied bail at least six times, he reportedly died of a heart attack in prison on 25 February 2021. "Mushtaq Ahmed should not have spent a single minute in prison, let alone his final ones. Many provisions in the DSA are criminalizing conduct that should not constitute an offence in the first place.

Pakistan bans domestic air travel for unvaccinated people

Pakistan has banned the domestic air travel for unvaccinated people as the COVID-19 cases crossed the 1 million-mark in the country on Sunday, according to officials.

The travel restriction, imposed by the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), will be applicable from August 1 on unvaccinated people of over 18 years of age.

"Restriction is for domestic air travel and people travelling from Pakistan to abroad or from abroad to Pakistan are exempted from restriction. It is also not applicable on link flights if these are within 72 hours of arrival or departure," according to an NCOC document.

Partially vaccinated people, foreign nationals, Pakistani nationals having documentary proof of vaccination abroad and patients with clinical conditions will be exempted from the restriction, it said.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Health Services said that 45 people died in the last 24 hours due to the COVID-19, taking the death toll to 23,016.

It said that 2,819 new cases were reported, taking the national tally to 10,04,694.

The positivity rate reached 6.32 per cent which is the highest during the fourth wave of the pandemic which hit the country early this month. Minister for Planning Asad Umar, who is also the chief of the NCOC, said that the coronavirus death toll in Pakistan was lower as compared to other regional countries.

"Covid deaths/million population in our region: Iran 1,037, Nepal 326, India 301, Sri Lanka 186, Afghanistan 160, Bangladesh 113, Pakistan 102," he tweeted.

He said that the risk was not over, urging people to get vaccinated.

In another development, a senior Supreme Court judge and his wife tested positive for coronavirus.

In November last year, 59-year-old Justice Waqar Ahmad Seth, the then chief justice of the Peshawar High Court, died due to the contagion.

Lockdown extended again in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley

KATHMANDU: The ongoing lockdown in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley was extended for 10 more days on Sunday till Aug. 4, though most of the restrictive measures have been relaxed in past weeks.

"We extended the lockdown by keeping certain activities under the prohibited list," Kali Prasad Parajuli, chief district officer of the Kathmandu district, told Xinhua. "The health protocols should be followed to carry out activities in the sectors where the provisions of lockdown have been relaxed."

Sporting events, swimming pools, theaters, mass meetings, rallies, cultural and religious events are still banned, as decided by the Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts in the valley.

Meanwhile, long and medium-distance transportation services have been reopened in a separate notice issued on July 23. On July 4, the authorities in the Kathmandu Valley allowed public and private transportation services within the region.

Under the new rules, schools can take examinations but with no more than 25 persons inside each room, and restaurants can offer takeaway services till 7:00 p.m. local time.

The Kathmandu Valley and many other parts of Nepal have been put under lockdown since April 29 to contain a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with the reduction in new cases since June, the restrictive measures have been eased in the valley while the lockdown was extended time and again.

"We know that health protocols have not been fully followed," said Parajuli. "It is difficult to enforce the health protocols fully because of the large population in Kathmandu."

He insisted that it is the duty of every citizen to follow the health protocols for themselves. "We also cannot allow economic activities to remain suspended forever as the livelihoods of many people are at stake," he said.

Sri Lanka's ruling coalition to hold internal talks to iron out differences

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa will hold crucial political talks on Monday for the first time aimed at ironing out differences with its constituent partner SLFP.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), led by former president Maithripala Sirisena, had supported the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) for a broader coalition to defeat the then ruling party candidate Sajith Premadasa of the United National Party (UNP).

However, since Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the SLPP coalition's win in the August 2020 parliamentary election, the SLFP leaders have been complaining of indifference by the SLPP leadership and its second level of leaders.

It is for the first time that Gotabaya Rajapaksa will be holding internal talks with any partner of the ruling alliance since he was elected president in November 2019.

SLFP leader Maithripala Sirisena and most of his senior colleagues have been ignored by the 72-year-old Gotabaya Rajapaksa for ministerial positions and the grassroots electoral organisers are unhappy about the domination in the respective localities by the SLPP men who hold government positions.

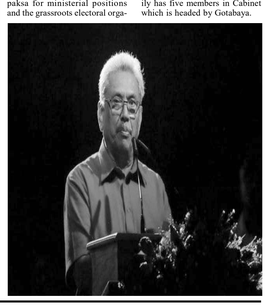
"We will be meeting the President this morning to discuss the progress of our electoral agreements.

We did sign agreements with the SLPP and another with the President," senior SLFP member Duminda Dissanayake told reporters.

The SLPP government has 15 SLFP members and their support would be crucial for Gotabaya Rajapaksa to retain two-thirds of the 150 seats plus the majority in the 225-member assembly.

However, the SLFP leaders have said they would not rock the boat by denying Gotabaya Rajapaksa his majority.

"It is our own government which we helped to set up," said Mahinda Amaraweera, the minister of environment and a senior SLFP member.

Last week, it was reported that Gotabaya Rajapaksa may seek another term in office.

The powerful Rajapaksa family has five members in Cabinet which is headed by Gotabaya.