At least 180 dead in India as rains trigger floods, landslides

New Delhi, IndiaAt least 180 people have died in the west Indian state of Maharashtra after torrential monsoon rains caused landslides and flooded low-lying areas, cutting off hundreds of villages.

At least 38 people were killed in Taliye, 180 kilometers (110 miles) southeast of the financial capital Mumbai, when a landslide flattened most of the small village, state government officials said. The death toll also includes 27 reported deaths from Satara district in the last 48 hours, a representative from the state's Disaster Management, Relief & Rehabilitation department told CNN.

In nine other landslides in other parts of Maharashtra, 59 people died and another 15 were killed in accidents linked to the heavy rainfall, state government officials said. Another 84 deaths are from the coastal district of Raigad, according to an official with the National Disaster Response Force on Monday.

The toll rose after 31 people who were reported missing after Thursday's landslide have been confirmed dead.

Since Thursday, Maharashtra, along with the neighboring states of Goa, Karnataka and Telangana, has faced heavy rainfall. In Maharashtra, the Radhanagari Dam overflowed and the Panchganga River saw water levels rise, submerging low-lying areas nearby. Rescue operations are continuing in those interior districts, toward the state's south and along the border with Karnataka.

In Maharashtra, more than 200,000 people have been evacuated, according to the state's Department of Relief and Rehabilitation.

The National Disaster Response Force, the Indian Army, Coast Guards, Navy, Air Force and state authorities have all been deployed as part of the rescue effort.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Friday issued a red alert for six districts of Maharashtra, forecasting "extremely heavy" rainfall and recommending preventive actions. The official said that districts Kolhapur and Sangli are still on alert, Reuters reported.

Parts of India's west coast received up to 594 millimeters (23 inches) of rainfall over 24 hours, forcing authorities to evacuate people from vulnerable areas as they released water from dams that were threatening to overflow.

"Unexpected very heavy rainfall triggered landslides in many places and flooded rivers," Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, who heads Maharashtra's state government, told journalists.

"Dams and rivers are overflowing. We are forced to release water from dams, and, accordingly, we are moving people residing near the river banks to safer places," he said.

Thackeray was due to visit flood-affected areas but his helicopter was unable to land due to low visibility, according to a Twitter thread posted by his office on Monday.

On Friday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced compensation of $2,686 for the families of victims, and $671 to those injured.

Thousands of trucks were stuck on a national highway linking Mumbai with the southern technology hub of Bengaluru, with the road submerged in some places, another Maharashtra government official said.

Meanwhile, hundreds of villages and towns were without electricity and drinking water, he said. Rivers were also overflowing in the neighboring southern states of Karnataka and Telangana where authorities were monitoring the situation, government officials there said.

Seasonal monsoon rains from June to September cause deaths and mass displacement across South Asia every year, but they also deliver more than 70% of India's rainfall and are crucial for farmers.CNN

ADB approves $165 million loan for COVID-19 vaccines in Nepal

MANILA: The Asian Development Bank (ADB) today approved a loan of $165 million for the Government of Nepal to purchase safe and effective vaccines against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

The project will support the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan in Nepal by procuring an estimated 15.9 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, which will benefit about 6.8 million Nepalese.

"ADB's support will help the Government of Nepal procure much-needed COVID-19 vaccines to protect its citizens from the further spread of this disease," said ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa. "It is essential that COVID-19 vaccines are quickly purchased and administered to help get the economy back on track by enabling the restoration of livelihoods and economic activities, as well as the resumption of educational and human development pursuits."

The project is financed by ADB's $9 billion Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility launched in December 2020 to offer rapid and equitable vaccine-related support to ADB developing member countries. Vaccines eligible for financing must meet at least one of the APVAX eligibility criteria: the vaccine has been selected for procurement through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) mechanism; the vaccine has been prequalified by the World Health Organization (WHO) or WHO emergency use listing; or the vaccine has received regular or emergency licensure or authorization by a Stringent Regulatory Authority. In addition to this project, ADB's ongoing technical assistance grants will support the strengthening of the vaccine delivery system, communication, and community engagement to raise awareness on the risks of COVID-19 and the benefits of vaccination. The government is mobilizing female community health volunteers to disseminate information among marginalized communities to raise awareness. At least one female health worker or volunteer will support the effort in every vaccination site or outreach center.

ADB closely collaborates with other partners, like the World Bank, COVAX, WHO, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in supporting the Government of Nepal in its efforts to vaccinate its people as soon as possible.

The project will complement the government's broader response through its $1.2 billion National Relief Program, which consists of social protection, health care, and economic relief measures. In May 2020, ADB provided support to the program through a $250 million concessional loan.

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region.

Five years in, Uzbekistan's reform program is being readied for Stage Two

Decrees and resolutions have been signed, the Powerpoint presentations have been prepared and some of the biggest state companies have either secured or are in the process of seeking international credit ratings. Uzbekistan is poised to begin Stage Two of its historic national reforms agenda.

Within months of his election five years ago, ending 25 years of post-Soviet isolation, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev had liberalized exchange controls, begun easing international visa requirements and announced a series of tax changes designed to appeal to investors. He then began the process of paring back the state to make way for the private sector. It has not been easy.

When the COVID-19 pandemic landed in Uzbekistan early in 2020, the government's political and commercial elites were poised for a "coming out" year of investment conferences, road shows and visits by banking and investment analysts. The annual Oil and Gas Uzbekistan conference and exhibition, a major event in Tashkent's business calendar, was scheduled to proceed in mid-May 2020. Its last-minute cancellation was taken as a signal that little that had been planned for Uzbekistan's international outreach was going to occur as planned.

Emergency measures were put in place to halt the virus's spread. Space for over 30,000 extra hospital beds was organized, including an entirely new specialist hospital built in record time just outside Tashkent.

According to the World Bank, international remittances -- a lifeline for many Uzbekistan families -- plunged by nearly 20%, from about $8.5 billion, nearly 15% of GDP, in 2019. What's more, some 600,000 expats were forced home, having lost jobs or the ability to meet residency requirements as national lockdowns spread worldwide.

Unemployment rose, but only slightly, to 6% -- a tribute to a series of emergency loans and other assistance to employers, and the beginnings of other reforms in energy, technology and agriculture. The pandemic brought many problems, but even in these difficult conditions, the country's GDP rose by 1.6% in 2020. A strong rebound is currently under way, with the Asian Development Bank projecting 6.5% growth for 2021.

But there is a longer-term problem. Over the years there has been a chronic under-investment in education. Outside the major cities and particularly in the more remote parts of the country, run-down schools, old Soviet-era curricula and shortages of both textbooks and qualified teachers dampened ambitions and generated persistent inequality. Where would the skilled technicians, managers and other professionals for the post-privatization world Mirziyoyev envisaged come from?

Hence a continuing emphasis on education and youth. Some $186 million was budgeted this year for new schools and renovations to old ones. Qualified teachers have been offered bonuses to work in remote regions. A new system of subsidies has been established to support private schools.

See P7

Pakistan plans to refloat ship that ran aground near Karachi

KARACHI: Pakistani authorities said Monday they were working on plans to refloat a cargo ship that ran aground off the coast near the southern port city of Karachi last week amid bad weather.

The Heng Tong 77 was en route to Istanbul from China when it drifted and got stuck in shallow waters Wednesday near the coast of Pakistani territory, authorities said. The event raised fears the oil being transported in the vessel could spill, potentially damaging the environment.

The management of Pakistan's Karachi Port Trust, which handles matters relating to naval traffic at the port, provided no details on how the ship will be refloated. But reports in local media said Pakistani authorities were providing support to the ship's owner, who was importing special equipment to refloat the ship.

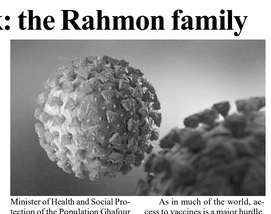
The stuck vessel did not affect the normal movement of ships in and out of the port located near Karachi, according to a statement Sunday from the port trust.

It said environmental experts were closely monitoring the situation and a contingency plan was in place to handle any emergency.

The cargo ship is 98 meters (322 feet) in length and 20 meters (66 feet) wide and has a capacity of 36,000 deadweight tonnage. It was not immediately clear what caused the ship to drift and run aground.

AP

Tajikistan's latest COVID outbreak: the Rahmon family



In January 2021, Tajikistan declared itself COVID-19 free. President Emomali Rahmon in a January 26 address to parliament proclaimed: "Tajikistan today is without COVID-19."

Six months later, the president's 64-year-old sister, Qurbonbi Rahmonova, died of COVID-19, according to RFE/RL and local reporting. Rahmonova was buried on July 21, as international condolences rolled in from Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the Sultan of Oman, among others. Officially, there's been no comment on the cause of Rahmonova's death.

Last week, RFE/RL reported that several of the president's relatives had been infected with the coronavirus that has ravaged much of the world. Rahmon's 88-year-old mother-in-law died in early July, with sources telling RFE/RL's Tajik Service that she had been diagnosed with COVID-19 and was on a ventilator when she passed. Other reportedly infected relatives include a son-in-law, businessman Shamsullo Sohibov, who has been hospitalized; and two of Rahmon's daughters with mild symptoms.

From its belated recognition of the virus's presence in late April 2020 up to January 10, 2021, Tajikistan had recorded just 13,308 cases and 90 deaths. The country's authorities admitted in late June that new cases had been discovered. As of July 26, according to WHO data, Dushanbe has reported only 15,004 cases and 118 deaths. There isn't readily available information on what variants are transmitting in Tajikistan, but given the devastation being wrought by the Delta variant, first identified in India, it's likely circulating in Tajikistan as well.

On July 26, First Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection of the Population Ghafour Muhsinzoda said at a press conference that the Delta variant "most likely" spread to Tajikistan via Russia. He also said there was no need to introduce a "general quarantine" but warned that this virus variant spreads faster than the original. The Delta variant is more contagious than other strains of the novel coronavirus and the unvaccinated are at significant risk. Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just $5 a month.

Tajikistan began vaccinations in late March with an initial delivery of 192,000 doses of COVAX-provided AstraZeneca vaccines. UNICEF's representative in the country, rather than a Tajik official or citizen, was the first person to receive a coronavirus vaccine in Tajikistan. In early July, the country's coronavirus task force ordered all citizens over 18 to get vaccinated, making Tajikistan the world's first country to mandate vaccination against the coronavirus.

According to the WHO, as of July 18 Tajikistan had administered 452,362 vaccine doses — but only 21,304 people had been fully vaccinated.

As in much of the world, access to vaccines is a major hurdle.

In mid-June, the Asian Development Bank approved a $25 million grant to help Dushanbe procure and distribute around 3 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, enough to vaccinate around 1.3 million people. China says it will deliver 1.5 million doses of the CoronaVac vaccine on July 28, following a delivery of 300,000 doses of the Sinovac vaccine last week. The United States donated 1.5 million doses of Moderna vaccines via COVAX to Tajikistan over the weekend. Tajikistan's total population is estimated at around 9.3 million.

In the July 26 press conference ostensibly devoted to the arrival of the U.S.-supplied vaccines, Tajik Health Minister Jamoliddin Abdullozoda was absent. RFE/RL reported that Interior Ministry sources support a nasty rumor that three of Qurbonbi Rahmonova's sons beat the minister and other health officials on July 20, just after her death. At the press conference, Deputy Health Minister Shodikhon Jamshed rejected questions about Abdullozoda, saying the minister was on a business trip.

thediplomat