

Weather woes wreak havoc in Asia, Pacific

Storm extends its deadly path across SE Asia

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — One of the most destructive storms in years extended its deadly path across Southeast Asia, blowing down wooden villages in Cambodia and crushing Vietnamese houses under mudslides after submerging much of the Philippine capital.

The death toll today climbed to 331 and was still rising.

"We're used to storms that sweep away one or two houses. But I've never seen a storm this strong," said Nam Tum, governor of Cambodia's Kampong Thom province.

The immediate threat eased as Typhoon Ketsana was downgraded to a tropical depression as it crossed today into a fourth nation, Laos. But its powerful winds and pummeling rain left a snaking trail of destruction.

Landslides triggered by the storm slammed into houses in central Vietnam on Tuesday, burying people including five members of the same family, the government said. The country's toll rose to 74 as officials recovered more bodies from the muck and swollen rivers, with 179 injured and a dozen missing, the government said late today.

It said the storm destroyed or damaged nearly 180,000 homes, inundated 150,000 more, and flattened crops across central Vietnam. More than 350,000 people were evacuated from the typhoon's path, posing a logistical headache to shelter and feed them.

"The scale of the devastation is stretching all of us," said Minnie Portales, a World Vision aid agency official in the Philippines. The agency said it was scrambling to assess the needs of victims in four countries, including the possibility that Laos would have damage.

Parts of two Vietnamese provinces remained cut off by floodwaters and downed trees and power lines on roads, officials said.

In neighboring Cambodia, at least 11 people were killed and 29 injured Tuesday as the storm toppled dozens of rickety houses and swept away residents in the two provinces north of the capital that were hit.

About 100 houses were destroyed and 400 others damaged.

Five members of the same family died when their house collapsed as they ate dinner, said Neth Sophana of the Red Cross.



AP Photo
People walk among a scene of devastation following a powerful quake in Pago Pago village on American Samoa today. The quake in the South Pacific hurled massive tsunami waves at the shores of Samoa and American Samoa, flattening villages and sweeping cars and people back out to sea while leaving scores dead and dozens missing.

Tsunami in South Pacific islands kills nearly 100

APIA, Samoa (AP) — A massive tsunami hurled by a powerful earthquake flattened Samoan villages and swept cars and people out to sea, killing at least 99 and leaving dozens missing today. The toll was expected to rise.

Survivors fled the fast-churning water for higher ground on the South Pacific islands and remained huddled there hours after the quake, with a magnitude between 8.0 and 8.3, struck around dawn Tuesday.

The quake was centered about 125 miles from Samoa, an island nation of 180,000 people located about halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii. It was about 120 miles from neighboring American Samoa, a U.S. territory that is home to 65,000 people.

Four tsunami waves 15-20 feet high roared ashore on American Samoa, reaching up to a mile inland, Mike Reynolds, superintendent of the National Park of American Samoa, was quoted as saying by a parks service spokesman.

The same day, western Indonesia was rocked by a strong underwater quake, briefly triggering a tsunami alert for countries along the Indian Ocean and sending panicked residents out of their houses. The alert was later canceled.

The Samoan capital, Apia, was virtually deserted by afternoon, with schools and businesses closed. Hours after the waves struck, fresh sirens rang out with another tsunami alert and panicked residents headed for higher ground again, although there was no indication of a new quake.

In American Samoa's capital of Pago Pago, the streets and fields were filled with ocean debris, mud, overturned cars and several boats as a massive cleanup effort continued into the night. Several buildings in the city — just a few feet above sea level — were flattened. Several areas were expected to be without electricity for up to a month.

In Washington, President Obama has declared a major disaster for American Samoa.

In a statement issued early today, Obama said he and his wife, Michelle, "will keep those who have lost so much in our thoughts and prayers."

Hampered by power and communications outages, officials in the South Pacific islands struggled to determine damage and casualties.

Samoan Police Commissioner Lilo Maiava told Associated Press that police there had confirmed 63 deaths but that officials were still searching the devastated areas, so the number of deaths might rise soon.

At least 30 people were killed on American Samoa, Gov. Togiola Tulafono said, adding that the toll was expected to rise as emergency crews were recovering bodies overnight.



Tulafono

Powerful earthquake rocks western Indonesia; at least 13 people killed

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A disaster management official says 13 people have been killed and thousands trapped under flattened buildings in a powerful earthquake in western Indonesia.

Rustam Pakaya, head of the Health Ministry's crisis center, said a field hospital was being prepared to assist the injured and medical teams were on the way from neighboring provinces.

A 7.6-magnitude quake hit just off the coast of the town of Padang, Western Sumatra province on Wednesday.

Officials said the quake triggered a landslide that cut off land transport to the area closest to the epicenter. Power and telecommunications were also cut.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake had a preliminary magnitude of 7.9, and struck 30 miles off the coast of Sumatra.

The quake was along the same fault line that spawned the massive 2004 India Ocean tsunami that killed more than 230,000 people.

It comes a day after a quake with a magnitude of between 8.0 and 8.3 in the South Pacific hurled a massive tsunami at the shores of Samoa and American Samoa, flattening villages and leaving at least 99 dead and dozens missing.

A tsunami warning for countries along the Indian Ocean was issued after the temblor struck in the early evening today and then lifted about an hour-and-a-half later.

The epicenter of today's temblor off Indonesia lies several thousand miles to the west, on the other side of Australia.

Witnesses said residents of Padang, and other town and cities, ran out of homes and buildings in fear when the quake hit in the early evening.

U.S. and its allies prepare for Iran talks contemplating new and tighter sanctions

VIENNA (AP) — Even as they prepare for new talks Thursday with Iran on its nuclear program, the U.S. and its allies are contemplating new and tighter sanctions on Tehran, in a clear signal of expectations that the negotiations may again end in failure.

The fact that the meeting is taking place at all offers some hope, reflecting both sides' desire to talk, despite a spike in tensions over last week's revelations by Iran that it had been secretly building a new uranium enrichment plant.

Ahead of Thursday's negotiations, the State Department stressed its

hope that the session would open the door to more in-depth dialogue about ways Iran could alleviate concerns that its emerging nuclear program may be secretly developing nuclear weapons.

If Iran is willing to address the nuclear issues, then there likely will be subsequent meetings, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said in Washington.

"That process will take some time," Crowley said. "We're not going to make a snap judgment on Thursday. We're going to see how that meeting goes, evaluate the willingness

of Iran to engage on these issues."

Crowley noted that U.S. President Barack Obama has said he intends to take a few months to assess Iran's position and consult with U.S. negotiating partners before deciding what next steps to take.

In Tehran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said the talks will be a "test" of their respect for Iran's rights.

"This meeting is a test to measure the extent of sincerity and commitment of some countries to law and justice," Ahmadinejad said after a Cabinet meeting today, according to official IRNA news agency.

While the negotiations are formally between chief Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili and the EU's Javier Solana, Solana will follow the lead of the five powers. The U.S., Britain, France, Russia and Germany are sending senior officials; Washington will be represented by William Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, while Russia is dispatching Sergey Ryabkov, a deputy foreign minister.

Only China, which appears most opposed to new UN sanctions on Tehran, is sending a relatively low-level representative to the talks, which were to be held at an undisclosed location outside Geneva.

Tehran's acknowledgment that it has kept silent on the plant — which can make both nuclear fuel and fissile warhead cores — has burdened the already heated atmosphere of the crucial negotiations to the point that expectations of what would constitute success are modest.

At best, the talks could start lowering passions over the hidden plant, Iran's three-year defiance of the UN Security Council's enrichment ban and Western assertions that Tehran is a supporter of terror — and lead to another meeting later this year.

That, in turn, could be the start of a process that could not only end the threat of an Israeli or U.S. strike against Iran's nuclear facilities as a last resort.

World

From wire reports

Billionaire clown Laliberte and crew mates off to space station aboard Russian Soyuz spacecraft

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan — A spacecraft carrying Canadian circus tycoon Guy Laliberte and two crew mates lifted off from the Kazakh steppe on schedule today headed for the International Space Station.

The Soyuz capsule carrying the Cirque du Soleil founder, U.S. astronaut Jeffrey Williams and Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surayev shed its rocket stages and entered orbit minutes after shooting up from the Baikonur launch facility atop a tower of flame.

Friends and family on the ground waited anxiously and then burst into cheers when an announcement that the ship was in orbit came over the loudspeaker. There were ecstatic hugs, sobs of relief and chants of "Guy! Guy!" They then broke into a rendition of Elton John's "Rocket Man."

"I'm very happy for him. It's amazing," said Laliberte's partner, former model Claudia Barilla, tears streaming down her face as she cradled her youngest son. "Now we know he's up there."

Footage from the capsule showed Surayev and Williams strapped in, operating controls and waving occasionally for the camera. A mission control official communicating with the astronauts said they were in excellent spirits, and a NASA TV announcer said they were "safely in orbit."



Laliberte

American arrested in Japan: Christopher John Savoie, an American father on a mission to reclaim his young children in Japan, was arrested over their alleged abduction while they were walking to school with his ex-wife, officials said today. Savoie snatched his two children — an 8-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl — by force Monday in the southern city of Fukuoka, shoved them into a car and drove away, said Akira Naraki, a police spokesman in the city. Savoie, a 38-year-old from Franklin, Tenn., was arrested by Japanese police as he tried to enter the U.S. Consulate in Fukuoka with the children, said Tracy Taylor, a spokesman at the consulate.

Creates security challenge: U.S. Lt. Gen. Frank Helmick says Iraq's budget shortfall due to low oil prices is creating a challenge in training and equipping Iraqi forces. Helmick says there is no question that Iraq's fiscal constraints this year and its anticipated budget crunch next year has slowed development of Iraq's security plans. Helmick told reporters today during a press conference in Baghdad that he is frustrated at the pace of training.

Dies after cervical cancer vaccine: British health officials temporarily suspended a vaccination program in Coventry on Tuesday after a 14-year-old girl died a few hours after being vaccinated against the virus that causes cervical cancer. Natalie Morton died in a hospital Monday, a few hours after being given the Cervarix vaccine, which protects against two strains of the human papilloma virus that causes cervical cancer. There are no indications of any link between Morton's death and the vaccine — administered at her school — although Morton appeared to be healthy before being given the shot. An autopsy will be carried out to determine a cause of death.

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