

Burst dam rumour pushes Mumbai toll over 800

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People hold on to a rope to cross a street after heavy rains in Mumbai.

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Deaths from India's heaviest rainfall on record surged passed the 800 mark when residents of a Mumbai shantytown stampeded following false rumours a dam had burst, say police.

Floods, landslides and building collapses had claimed at least 786 lives in Maharashtra state prior today's stampede in the suburb of Nehru Nagar which left a further 16 people dead including seven children.

Eighteen people were also injured in the stampede, which followed reports that the dam holding back the waters of nearby Lake Pawai had burst, according to the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

"The slum was not having electric supply and as such the slum residents were not able to see or hear appeals by police on television urging people not to believe in the rumours," police chief Arup Patnaik was quoted as saying by PTI.

Weather officials predicted more heavy rain for the city of 15 million, which has been brought to a near-standstill with schools, banks and stock markets closed and public transport barely operating.

Also today, at least 10 people died and 49 were wounded when a bomb exploded on a crowded passenger train near the town of Jaunpur, about 640 kilometres east of New Delhi, a railway official said.

Yesterday, at least 10 people died and 14 went missing when an Indian offshore oil platform caught fire.

State-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corp, (ONGC) which owns the platform, said 354 workers were rescued from the platform along with six divers who were undergoing decompression.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who today toured the rain-ravaged areas in a helicopter, said he was "deeply pained by this human tragedy" and announced emergency aid totalling seven billion rupees (\$A213.72 million) for the Maharashtra state government.

The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry estimated damage in Maharashtra at 10 billion rupees.

B.M. Kulkarni, who heads Maharashtra state's police emergency control room, told AFP today before the

reports of the stampede that 273 people had died in Mumbai and at least 513 in other parts of the state.

He said the death toll rose sharply after more than 160 deaths by drowning were reported in Mumbai.

"Around 166 people drowned in these floods and these numbers came in only much later," Kulkarni said.

Aerial pictures of Mumbai showed much of the city marooned in debris-laden water. Long queues of vehicles were stranded on highways.

However, the main airport reopened early afternoon after being closed since Tuesday due to waterlogged runways.

Aside from allowing the resumption of commercial flights, the reopening had allowed the air force to start flying in relief materials, PTI said.

Suburban trains -- the lifeline of the city -- were also limping back to normal, a railway official said, but inter-city lines had yet to be restored.

Heavy casualties occurred in a remote village in Raigad district of the rain-lashed state, where at least 100 people from 20 families were feared killed by a landslide, PTI said.

Tonnes of mud flattened houses in Jui village, 170km south of Mumbai, on Monday but news of the tragedy reached authorities only three days later, the report said.

Soldiers had reached the village of rice farmers and were supervising rescue and relief operations but "it is difficult to remove the debris without machines," said an officer.

"Even then it would take days ... and the chances of rescuing people alive is remote," an army official told PTI.

Authorities were air-dropping food and water to stranded residents of Mumbai and Raigad, the Hindi news channel Aaj Tak said.

The city's weather bureau said Mumbai received 944mm of rainfall in a 24-hour period ending mid-morning yesterday, the most rainfall ever recorded in a single day in India and beating a record which has stood since July 1910.

Power supplies that had been cut as a precaution as the rains flooded streets waist-high were restored to some parts of the city.

The annual monsoon rains which sweep the subcontinent from June to September routinely kill hundreds of people in India and cause widespread devastation.

Home Minister Shivraj Patil told parliament yesterday before the latest figures were released that since the start of the monsoon season in early June, 633 people had lost their lives in floods or landslides.

About 76,000 animals have been killed, and 700,000 hectares of land and 283,000 houses have been damaged.

He said 5.6 million people in 131 districts and 16,000 villages have been affected by the floods.

Premier Singh said he would pursue the possibility of setting up flood forecasting systems for major Indian cities.

"When I went to Washington recently, I met a lot of scientists and technical experts who showed us how forecasting techniques helped in disaster management," he said after his tour of the state.

AFP

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