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India's rains leave 786 dead

(AFP)

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Floods, landslides and building collapses caused by India's heaviest-ever recorded rainfall have killed at least 786 people and brought the financial capital Mumbai to a near-standstill, police said, AFP reported.

Weather officials predicted more heavy rain for the city of 15 million, where schools, banks and stock markets were closed and public transport barely operating.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who Thursday 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 (162 million dollars) for the Maharashtra state government.



Houses stand on the edge of a landslide in the Saki Naka suburb of Mumbai. Floods, landslides and building collapses caused by India's heaviest-ever recorded rainfall have killed at least 786 people.[AFP]

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 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, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency 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.

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Heavy casualties occurred in a remote village in Raighad 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, 170 kilometers (105 miles) 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 Raighad, the Hindi news channel Aaj Tak said.

The city's weather bureau said Mumbai received 944.2 millimeters (37.1 inches) of rainfall in a 24-hour period ending mid-morning Wednesday, 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 Wednesday before the latest figures were released that since the start of the monsoon season in early June, 633 people have lost their lives in floods or landslides.

About 76,000 animals have been killed, and 700,000 hectares (1.72 million acres) 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.

Stampede kills at least 15

A stampede set off by rumors of a dam burst also killed at least 15 people, including seven children, and injured more than 25 in a Bombay shantytown, said R.R. Patil, deputy chief minister of Maharashtra state.

People in the Nehru Nagar slum in northern Bombay panicked after hearing the rumors in the wake of landslides set off by two days of rains that began Tuesday and buried alive dozens of Bombay residents and cut off neighboring villages.

"People died due to false rumors," Patil told The Associated Press. "Fifteen people have been killed and seven are children."

He said police vans with loudspeakers had been deployed to stem the panic.

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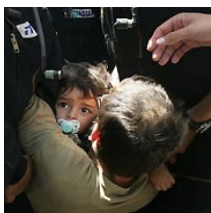
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