

China Quake Toll Continues to Rise



A young Chinese girl weeps in front of a collapsed building in Dujiangyan, May 13.

Heavy storms and wrecked roads hampered efforts to reach areas hardest-hit by China's worst earthquake in three decades on Tuesday as the death toll rose to around 12,000.

State media reports indicated that the number of dead was likely to soar, with Xinhua news agency saying 12,000 people were buried in the Mianzhu area of Sichuan province and that rescue troops had arrived for the first time at Wenchuan county, the epicenter of the quake.

Death tolls in different areas are official estimates, given lack of access to worst-hit areas and inability to make accurate body counts under collapsed buildings.

A strong aftershock rocked Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, on Tuesday afternoon, one of several over the last day.

"Office workers in downtown Chengdu took the streets again after the quake," Xinhua said. "Many said it was the strongest aftershock" since Monday's quake.

Premier Wen Jiabao, visiting Sichuan, ordered troops to clear roads to Wenchuan, a hilly area about 100 km (62 miles) from the provincial capital Chengdu.

Damage from Monday's 7.9 magnitude quake left the area, about 1,600 km southwest of Beijing, completely cut off.

But rain and thick clouds over a province famous for its giant

panda reserves meant that military helicopters dispatched to the area could not yet land. Parachutists belonging to the People's Liberation Army cancelled a rescue drop due to heavy storms.

State television showed highways buckled and caved in from the quake and massive rockslides lining the roads.

In Dujiangyan--about midway between Chengdu and the epicenter--there was devastation, with buildings reduced to rubble and bodies in the streets, some only partially covered.

Troops and ambulances thronged the streets, and military trucks able to do heavy lifting had arrived. But many residents simply stood beside their wrecked homes, cradling possessions in their arms, and many huddled in relief tents under heavy rain.

Rescuers had worked frantically through the night, pulling bodies from homes, schools, factories and hospitals demolished by the quake, which rolled from Sichuan across much of China.

China's Health Ministry issued an urgent appeal for blood and its Ministry of Railways imposed a state of emergency for trains linking Sichuan with other provinces.

The Sichuan quake was the worst to hit China since the 1976 Tangshan tremor in northeastern China where up to 300,000 died. Then, unlike now, the Communist Party kept a tight lid on information about the extent of the disaster.

Italy Vows Tough Immigration Policy

Italians expect greater firmness by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's new government in handling immigration, but oppose racial discrimination, the new foreign minister said.

"Italian citizens do not want racist or xenophobic behavior by the Berlusconi government, which it would in any case never adopt," Franco Frattini said on RAI public radio, adding: "But by their vote they have asked for a firm attitude," AFP reported.

Berlusconi's rightwing government is preparing an arsenal of

controversial anti-immigration measures targeting Romanians in particular, but EU rules limit its room for maneuver.

"Italians have asked for change, mainly in strengthening measures to punish those who break the rules," Frattini said, citing the example of a Romanian woman alleged to have tried to kidnap a child in Naples this weekend.

"That kind of news, he warned, "sharply shakes up public opinion."

Hacker Leaks 6m Chileans' Records

A computer hacker in Chile has published confidential records belonging to six million people on the Internet, officials say.

The information was obtained by hacking into government and military servers, and was posted on a technology blog, BBC reported.

It included ID card numbers, addresses, telephone numbers and academic records.

The hacker left a message saying the aim was to demonstrate the poor level of data protection in Chile, says the newspaper which uncovered the story.

El Mercurio newspaper reports that the data came from computer

servers at the education ministry, the military and the electoral service.

It was posted on the forum of a Chilean blog dedicated to technology issues, but was quickly removed by site's administrators, who contacted the police.

Links to files containing the information were also posted on another Chilean website, and again promptly removed, El Mercurio reports.

Police commissioner Jaime Jara told the newspaper that an investigation into the incident was underway.

News in Brief

British MPs Lament Spiritual Poverty

Britons are unhappy because they are in spiritual poverty, not because they are materially poor, according to a group of MPs.

A report by a cross-party group of Christian MPs says the country is wallowing in misery despite increasing wealth and emphasis on happiness in schools, reported Telegraph.co.uk.

Their study states: "One impetus behind this project was our sense that there is a strong feeling of disaffection among the inhabitants of these islands. It seemed to us that our national sense of wellbeing is at a low ebb; people are wanting something more out of life.

"Given all the advances of recent years, we seek to understand why a sense of human wellbeing--happiness if you like--is not more widespread."

Costa Rica Aims to Become Carbon Neutral Nation

Costa Rica will plant seven million trees in 2008 to soak up as many greenhouse gas emissions as it produces, in a bid to become the world's first carbon neutral nation, a top official said.

"The stated goal is to be the first neutral country as far as greenhouse gas emissions is concerned," said Energy and Environment Minister Roberto Dobles, AFP reported.

"To get there, this administration is betting on halting deforestation and on the 'Plant a Tree' project," he added, referring to an ongoing government initiative to plant as many trees as possible in the country.

"The project aims to plant seven million trees this year, meaning that in our country there would be 1.5 trees for each Costa Rican," he said.

The minister added that in 2007 the country managed to plant five million trees, spurred by the desire to forestall an impending environmental catastrophe.

"Climate change is the main threat facing humanity and, even so, the world still can't agree to fight this problem," Dobles said.

Every country can help in the struggle, even a small nation like his own, Dobles said.

"We all know developed countries and big developing nations like China, Brazil and India are chiefly responsible for most of the greenhouse gases that destroy the ozone layer.

"That doesn't mean a country like Costa Rica should stand by doing nothing. On the contrary, we're working on a series of initiatives on the national and global levels to lessen the impact of climate change," the minister said.

US Obesity Rates Alarming

New research shows "alarming levels" of obesity in most ethnic groups in the United States, principal investigator Dr. Gregory L. Burke, of Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina told Reuters Health.

The study also confirms the potentially deadly toll obesity exacts on the heart and blood vessels.

"The obesity epidemic has the potential to reduce further gains in US life expectancy, largely through an effect on cardiovascular disease mortality (death)," Burke and colleagues warn in the latest issue of Archives of Internal Medicine.

Among 6,814 middle-age or older adults participating in the Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis, or "MESA" study, researchers found that more than two thirds of white, African American and Hispanic participants were overweight and one third to one half were obese.

Greece Birth Rate Nudges Up

The birth rate in Greece, among the lowest in Europe, has grown slightly, but not enough to offset a rapidly aging population, the national statistics service said.

According to AFP, for the first time since 1995, the number of births in Greece surpassed that of deaths in 2005 and in 2006, the statistics body ESYE said in a statement.

The birth rate fell to its lowest levels in 2001, when there were 9.3 births for every thousand people.

The fertility rate also increased slightly to 1.41 in 2006 (from 1.34 in 2005 and 1.32 in 1995). This is a theoretical rate calculated from the number of children born per woman of child-bearing age.

Greece's population, almost 11.2 million in 2006, has been increasing mainly due to immigration. Those over 65 however, continue to represent a growing portion of the population, representing 18.5 percent in 2006.

By 2050, 31.5 percent of Greece's population will be over the age of 65, 12 percent will be children, while the remaining 56.4 percent will be between 15 and 64 years of age, according to ESYE's predictions.