

Thousands missing in Uttarakhand

Manmohan announces Rs10b aid for state, Kedarnath temple closed for a year

DEHRADUN/NEW DELHI Thousands are said to be missing in Uttarakhand after unprecedented rain and cloudburst led to landslides and flash floods killing more than 100 people and leaving 62,000 stranded, officials and survivors said.

Such was the magnitude of the disaster that a worried Uttarakhand Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna said: "It is a calamity that has numbed me by its sheer magnitude."

Bahuguna said that more than 18km of the mountainous trek to Kedarnath, one of the most revered Hindu shrines, had been ripped apart and it would not be possible for pilgrims to go there for at least a year.

The full impact of nature's fury was visible as days of blinding rain, 380mm, some 450 per cent more than usual, abated and the skies cleared on Wednesday, allowing the army and paramilitary forces to rescue thousands of pilgrims and tourists in the devastated temple town of Kedarnath.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi saw from helicopters the extent of damage and destruction. The prime minister granted Rs10 billion for disaster relief in the state and said the death toll could be higher than the official estimate of 102.

One official involved in the evacuation and rescue work said on telephone that they feared that thousands might have perished in the rains and flash floods in Uttarakhand. "We are not sure of the number who have died but for sure the numbers are much higher as more than 15,000 people are reported missing," the official said.

Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi voiced distress over the nature's fury.

The prime minister said more than 10,000 people have



The flooded Yamuna flows dangerously close to the Old Bridge in New Delhi on Wednesday.

Manvender Vashist/PTI

been rescued. Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde said over 62,000 pilgrims were still stranded.

"What chairperson UPA and I saw was most distressing. While the most recent estimates put the death toll at 102, it is feared that loss of lives could eventually be much higher," Singh said.

He said more than 10,000 people have been rescued and were being provided food, clothing and shelter.

Singh said he has also directed all federal agencies to render all possible assistance in their domain to the state.

The prime minister also announced ex gratia assistance of Rs200,000 each to the families of those who have lost their lives and Rs50,000 each to those injured.

In addition, ex gratia as-

sistance of Rs100,000 each would also be provided to those whose houses have been completely destroyed and Rs50,000 each to those whose houses have been damaged.

The prime minister said he and Sonia saw the large scale devastation that has been caused in the flood affected areas of Uttarakhand.

"Our hearts go out to the families of those who have lost their lives and those who have suffered injury or loss of property in this huge tragedy," he said.

Singh said assessing the magnitude of the losses, both in terms of lives lost and houses destroyed, or the damage to buildings, roads and other infrastructure, was an exercise that will take some more time.

"The priority for the authorities at the moment is to rescue the stranded and provide urgently-needed succor to those most in need of it," he said adding the federal and state governments have deployed all possible

response force, the army and air force joined the rescue efforts, using ropes to rescue those stranded in precarious cliffs.

The turbulent Mandakini river swallowed huge swathes of land near Kedar-

stretches of mountain roads disappeared in landslides, rendering rescue work difficult.

In Himachal Pradesh, also hit by heavy rain and cloudburst, over 1,100 tourists were still stranded in Sangla Valley and Pooh. Around 70 tourists were rescued.

In the national capital, the water level in the Yamuna was near the 207.7 metre danger level, the highest since 1978, an official said. One man died while bathing in the Yamuna in north Delhi.

"The water level of the Yamuna would reach 207.7 metres, and this is the highest ever recorded since 1978," Dharmpal, secretary of the Revenue and Disaster Management Department, said.

As the Yamuna swelled, around 2,000 families living

'The priority for the authorities at the moment is to rescue the stranded'

resources to deal with the immediate aftermath of the ghastly tragedy.

Home Secretary RK Singh visited Dehradun, the state capital, to study the situation. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police, the National Disaster Re-

nath. Officials said all the 250 plus government and private hotels and lodges and 100 shops around the temple have been flattened.

Survivors returning from there said that they saw bodies on roadsides. Entire

Advani 'not well', refuses to meet Mohan Bhagwat

NEW DELHI A meeting between Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) veteran LK Advani was called off on Wednesday after the leader reported "unwell", said party sources.

Bhagwat, who played a key role in stopping a sulkling Advani from quitting key BJP posts, was to meet Advani here.

However, the meeting was called off later, after Advani reported unwell.

Advani, who played a key role in building the BJP, last week resigned from all key posts after Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi was named head of the party's election campaign committee.

He took a u-turn after Bhagwat called and, according to sources, assured him that he will be consulted in all party decisions.

Meanwhile, in a clear indication that the tussle between Advani and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi is far from over, the patriarch's close aide Sudheendra Kulkarni has written an article dubbing Modi as an

delusion of becoming the prime minister.

Kulkarni firmly maintains in his article that despite his age, Advani, 85, has still a lot to contribute to the party and the country. He has justified Advani's opposition to Modi and said the senior leader did not go back on the criticism he had made of the BJP in his resignation letter.

"An autocrat (Modi) is sought to be enthroned, and a perfect democrat (Advani) is being marginalised and humiliated. A self-centered leader who has shown that he cares two hoots for the party organisation and long-time party colleagues in his own state has suddenly become all powerful in the BJP's national scheme of things, whereas a selfless leader who toiled for many decades to build the party brick by brick is being cast aside as a useless relic," Kulkarni said.

Agencies

'An autocrat Modi is sought to be enthroned'

"autocrat" who cares "two hoots" for the party.

In an article posted on rediff.com, Kulkarni, who is one of the advisers to Advani and is virtually his alter ego, has also called BJP president Rajnath Singh "foxy".

He has said the BJP chief has "astrologically-induced

Terror threat to Amarnath Yatra: Shinde

NEW DELHI The annual Amarnath Yatra is facing a terror threat and the government is making all efforts to ensure security of the pilgrims, Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde said on Wednesday.

"There is terror threat to Amarnath Yatra," Shinde said when asked about reports which suggested threat to the pilgrimage to the cave shrine in Jammu and Kashmir.

The nearly two-month-long annual Amarnath Yatra is scheduled to begin on June 28. The home minister said the government was taking precaution and sending additional forces to ensure safety and security of all pilgrims visiting the cave shrine.

"All efforts will be made to ensure security of every pilgrim," he said. General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Northern Command, Lieutenant General KT Pamaik

had said on Monday that the army has received inputs that terrorists might try to disrupt the Yatra. "Intelligence inputs which we are receiving suggest that they (terrorists) have intentions to disrupt the Yatra," he had said.

The Jammu and Kashmir government has also declared the entire Amarnath Yatra route in the state as "highly prone" to terror strikes and said it has directed security agencies to take

necessary steps to ensure safety of pilgrims. "Considering the security scenario, topography of the area, high potential of terrorist attacks on the pilgrims to create law and order situation throughout the state and the country, sensitive nature of the yatra, and the high publicity the yatra generates, the entire yatra area is highly prone to terrorist attacks," the state home department said.

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There are more than 20 people from Lucknow and over 30 families from Uttar Pradesh who have been caught in the disaster in Uttarakhand, informed sources said. Many were lucky to telephonically alert their families before losing the mobile network.

The Uttarakhand government confirmed Wednesday that bodies of two policemen and three ITBP troopers who were washed away earlier have been recovered.

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Normalcy brings back luxury to J&K

GULMARG Kashmir has once again got a five-star luxury resort two decades after the only such property in the Valley closed down due to militancy-related issues. It's a sign of increasing normalcy in a state that has seen a bruising insurgency that only recently has shown signs of abating.

With the beginning of the separatist violence, the state's only 5-star heritage hotel, the Oberoi Hotel, functioning in the palace of the erstwhile Dogra aristocrats in Srinagar was closed in early 1990s. Other hotels in Srinagar were also either closed or converted into makeshift barracks of the security forces.

Now, two high-end properties, the Taj and the Lalit, have reopened in Srinagar but they are not of the five-star variety.

Spread over seven acres of land amid majestic pine trees over a terraced mountain slope in this ski-lovers' paradise, 50km from summer capital Srinagar, the best part

about the 85-room Khyber Himalayan Resort and Spa is that 70 per cent of its staff are locals. Little wonder that its opening season occupancy is a 95 per cent.

"It is a challenge to get quality staff, make them perform and retain them because my competitors at the moment are good resorts

both in the country and outside," Alex Koshy, the resort's general manager, said.

He said he is delighted at the way things are shaping up at the resort. "For a hotel, reaching 95 per cent occupancy in its first season is an achievement," Koshy added.

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