

South Bengal toll at 42

OUR BUREAU

May 25: The toll in the south Bengal districts from yesterday's cyclone has gone up to 42 with reports of 22 more deaths coming from the two 24-Parganas, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Nadia and Burdwan.

"Two air force helicopters, one each for North and South 24-Parganas, dropped food packets and two columns (about 140) of army personnel carried out rescue operations," chief secretary Asok Mohan Chakrabarti said.

In North 24-Parganas, seven of a family, including three children, were swept away last night by the swirling Ichhamati near Basirhat. In South, district magistrate Khalil Ahmed said five people died in Patharpratima.

Four deaths were reported from Birbhum. While a couple died in sleep after a portion of the mud wall of their house fell on them last night at Murari, falling trees killed two farmers in Nalhati and Suri today. Three persons died in Murshidabad, two in Nadia's Chakdah and one in Burdwan's Memari. Over 2,000 houses were damaged in the two districts, officials said.

Large swathes of south Bengal are without power. "Our engineers are conducting repairs on a war footing. In many places the damage is so huge, it will take three to four days to repair," said a power department official. Over 1,000 poles have been uprooted and wires have snapped at innumerable points.

Chakrabarti put the "official" death toll in the state at 64, but reports of casualties are pouring in.

Storm trail cripples north, 40 landslides in Darjeeling



House reduced to rubble in Darjeeling town. Picture by Kundan Yolmo

OUR BUREAU

May 26: The beast lost its teeth today but left a trail of destruction in north Bengal before death, setting off at least 40 landslides across the Darjeeling hills and killing 20.

The toll in the storm and rain triggered by the dissipating Aila in north Bengal stood at 23, with three deaths reported each from Malda, Cooch Behar and South Dinajpur.

A 12-year-old girl, hit by a flying branch, was among the victims.

The slides started from 9.30am after the rain that lashed the hills all night continued in the morning, too. In two hours, there were at least 25 slips in and around Darjeeling and Kurseong towns.

Hundreds of tourists were stranded both in Darjeeling and Siliguri as Hill Cart Road and the bypasses leading to the hill resort getting clogged.

By evening, at least 20 people, including four children, got buried under the rubble, sliding off hill slopes.

Police, firemen and volunteers were on the alert since last night but they had too much on their hands today.

"I have never seen anything like this before. There are landslips all around and rescue work is getting hampered by the closed roads. We are having to clear rubble at one place and rush to another for search and rescue operations," a volunteer said.

Darjeeling district magistrate Surendra Gupta said in

the evening that he had called in a team of disaster management specialists from Dhubri in Assam. "These men have been trained by the National Disaster Management Institute and they will of great help. We are having problems reaching remote areas like Rimbik, where we do not know about the situation as the roads have been cut off," Gupta said.

If a few hundred tourists were stuck in Darjeeling, a few thousand were in Siliguri, waiting for an opportunity to go uphill.

Tashi Pencho, a Darjeeling hotel owner, said he was praying for an early end to the crisis. This is peak season in the Queen of the Hills.

Many like Richard Perriera of Mumbai, who has gone

to Darjeeling with a group of 58, were in a dilemma. "We had return tickets for tonight and we missed the train. I wonder how we will get tickets for all of us in one go," a worried Richard said.

In Siliguri, only a handful of tourists had made it to Sikkim as NH31A was blocked in several places. The highway was cleared late afternoon.

Most Siliguri hotels, however, had tourists who had decided to stay put for the night. "I had heard that the road to Sikkim was open, but I am travelling with my wife and two children. But we are yet to take a decision. Let us see whether we can go to Sikkim tomorrow. We have to return to Calcutta by train on Thursday night," said Debashis Dutta.

Sunderbans home hunt

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Calcutta, May 26: Floodwaters in sanctuary, tiger in village.

A Sunderbans tiger apparently looking for safe ground after its reserve went under water during yesterday's cyclone ambled into a villager's home.

Pinto Saha, almost face to face with the beast at his house in Jamespur village of South 24-Parganas' Gosaba, raised the alarm.

He and his neighbours informed the reserve officials who arrived and tranquillised the tiger, Subrat Mukherjee, director of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve, said.

The swirling Bidya had smashed an embankment, flooded the reserve and forced the animal to seek safe ground in Jamespur, 170km from Calcutta, Mukherjee said.

The reserve officials tranquillised the animal, Mukherjee said, adding it was put in a cage for being released into the core area of the forest.

The tiger wasn't the only one fleeing the floodwaters: Mukherjee said two deer had strayed into Satyanarayanpur village in Bali Island. They were caught and released into the forest later. However, reserve officials found one deer dead in Haldibari.

The director of the Sunderbans Biosphere Reserve, N.C. Bahuguna, said work on the captive breeding of the spotted deer, many of which were feared washed away during the cyclone-triggered floods, would continue. He declined to put a number on the missing ones from the government-run breeding centres at Jhar-



A Bengal tiger

khali and Bakkhali but asserted that the project "will continue".

Boats have been kept on stand-by after reports that around 20 full-grown crocodiles had escaped from a breeding centre at Bhagabatpur near Sagar Island.

"It will be almost impossible to locate and capture them as the waters are still high even during low tide," a senior forest official said.

Another forester said the Bakkhali and Jharkhali deer breeding centres would be rebuilt, but stressed that the priority now was to protect people from the straying animals.

ADMISS
FOR NRI MANAGEMENT
Admission open for the following
MBE
(7+Fe
MD • M
(Last few se
For Admi
NEXT FOUNDATION
KOLKATA OFFICE : 9/B Dargah
Ph.: 033 - 65221757 /
CORP. OFFICE : 403, Mittal
Ph.: (080) 32405754 / 55