Relatives react to a landslide site where three people were killed, after heavy rain hit southwestern Japan, in Uwajima, Ehime prefecture on July 9. Rescuers in southwestern Japan dug up more bodies Monday as they searched for dozens still missing after heavy rains caused severe flooding and left residents to return to their homes unsure where to start the cleanup. (AP)

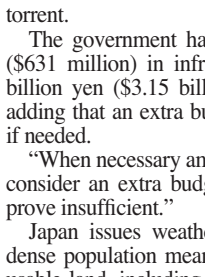
Japan

Death toll rises to 156

Japan struggles to get help for flood victims

KURASHIKI, Japan, July 10, (Agencies): Japan struggled on Tuesday to restore utilities after its worst weather disaster in 36 years killed at least 156 people, with survivors facing health risks from broiling temperatures and a lack of water, while rescuers kept up a grim search for victims.

Torrential rain unleashed floods and landslides in western Japan last week, bringing death and destruction, especially to neighbourhoods built decades ago near steep slopes. About 67 people are missing, the government said.



Abe

Prime Minister **Shinzo Abe** has cancelled an overseas trip to cope with the disaster, which at one point forced several million from their homes.

The premier faced some criticism after a photograph made the rounds on Twitter showing him and the defence minister at a dinner with lawmakers last Thursday, just as the rain was worsening.

Abe has seen his support rates rebound after slumping over a suspected cronyism scandal and is keen to prevent any declines ahead of a ruling-party leadership race in September.

Power had been restored to all but 3,500 households but more than 200,000 people remain without water under scorching sun, with temperatures hitting 33 Celsius (91 Fahrenheit) in some of the hardest-hit areas, such as the city of Kurashiki.

"There have been requests for setting up air-conditioners due to rising temperatures above 30 degrees today, and at the same time we need to restore lifelines," Finance Minister Taro Aso told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

Roads caked in dried mud threw up clouds of dust when rescue vehicles or other cars drove by.

Stunned survivors recounted narrow escapes.

"It was close. If we had been five minutes later, we would not have made it," said Yusuke Suwa, who fled by car with his wife early on Saturday when an evacuation order came after midnight.

"It was dark and we could not see clearly what was happening, although we knew water was running outside. We did not realize it was becoming such a big deal."

Inundated

A quarter of flood-prone Mabi district of Kurashiki, sandwiched between two rivers, was inundated after a levee crumbled under the force of the torrent.

The government has set aside 70 billion yen ($631 million) in infrastructure funds with 350 billion yen ($3.15 billion) in reserve, Aso said, adding that an extra budget would be considered if needed.

"When necessary amounts firm up ... we would consider an extra budget later on if these funds prove insufficient."

Japan issues weather warnings early, but its dense population means that almost every bit of usable land, including some flood plains, is built on in the mostly mountainous country, leaving it prone to disasters.

Some residents of Mabi had shrugged off the warnings given the area's history of floods.

"We had evacuation orders before and nothing happened, so I just thought this was going to be the same," said Kenji Ishii, 57, who stayed at home with his wife and son.

But they were soon marooned by rising flood waters and a military boat had to pluck them from the second floor of their house, where they had taken refuge.

Hundreds of residents of Mabi were taking refuge in a school on high ground.

"Everything was destroyed and both of our cars were totalled as well," said a woman in her forties, who was taking shelter in the gym with her brother and parents.

"We don't know how long we're allowed to stay here. Finding a place to live in, even if it's temporary, is our top priority."

Landslides

Most of the deaths in hard-hit Hiroshima were from landslides in areas where homes had been built up against steep slopes, beginning in the 1970s, said Takashi Tsuchida, a civil engineering professor at Hiroshima University.

"People have been living for 40 to 50 years in an area that had latent risk, but decades went by without disaster," he said.

"But intense rainfall has become more frequent, and the hidden vulnerability has become apparent," he said.

Though the weather has cleared up, the disaster goes on.

A new evacuation order went out on Tuesday in a part of Hiroshima after a river blocked by debris overflowed its banks, affecting 23,000 people.

Another storm, Typhoon Maria, was bearing down on outlying islands in the Okinawa chain but it had weakened from a super-typhoon and was not expected to have any impact on Japan's four main islands.

In related news, rescue workers carried out house-to-house searches Tuesday in the increasingly unlikely hope of finding survivors after days of deadly floods and landslides that have claimed 156 lives in Japan's worst weather-related disaster for decades.

By Tuesday morning, rescue workers were going door-to-door, looking for survivors — or victims — of the disaster.

"It's what we call a grid operation, where we are checking every single house to see if there are people still trapped inside them," an official with the local Okayama prefecture government told AFP.

"We know it's a race against time, we are trying as hard as we can."

Hideto Yamanaka was leading a team of around 60 firefighters dispatched from outside the prefecture searching homes.

"I'm afraid elderly people who were living alone may have failed to escape," said Yamanaka, 53.

"Physically weak people may have been late in getting out when it suddenly started raining hard, swamping the area," he told AFP.

Fumiko Inokuchi, 61, was inside her home, sorting through the damage caused by floods that submerged the entire first floor.

This file handout photo provided by the Shenyang Municipal Information Office shows late Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo's wife Liu Xia (center), holding a portrait of Liu Xiaobo on July 15, 2017. (AFP)

Asia

Liu's widow leaves China: Liu Xia, the widow of Chinese Nobel dissident Liu Xiaobo who had been under de facto house arrest in China, left the country Tuesday en route to Germany, according to friends.

Despite facing no charges, the 57-year-old poet had endured heavy restrictions on her movements since 2010 when her husband won the Nobel Peace Prize – an award that infuriated Beijing.

Friends said she was on board a Finnair flight to Helsinki on her way to Berlin, a move that came just days before the first anniversary of her husband's death from liver cancer. Berlin-based dissident Liao Yiwu, who is expected to welcome her in the German capital later Tuesday, voiced his joy on Twitter, saying: "I am so, so, so happy! Finally, finally, Xia is coming today!!"

Liu had become a cause celebre and was seen as a test case for China's attitude to human rights, with activists and foreign powers urging Beijing to allow her to leave the country.

Her husband Liu Xiaobo, a veteran of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, died last year while serving an 11-year jail sentence for "subversion", the first Nobel laureate to die in custody since the Nazi Germany era.

In an emotional phone call with her friend Liao recently, Liu said, "they should add a line to the constitution: 'Loving Liu Xiaobo is a serious crime – it's a life sentence'." (AFP)

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Taiwan evacuated residents: Taiwan began evacuating residents in mountainous areas while offices and schools were closed and flights were cancelled on Tuesday as Typhoon Maria churned towards the island bringing torrential rains and powerful winds.

Maria was 310 kilometres (190 miles) east of the northeastern coastal town of Yilan packing gusts of up to 173 kilometres an hour as of 5:00 pm (0900 GMT), the weather bureau said.

Its impact was expected to be strongest from late Tuesday to early Wednesday although it has weakened slightly in the past few hours, with up to 500 millimetres (20 inches) of rainfall forecast for some areas, the bureau added. (AFP)

North Korea

Scrapped drill with S. Korea would have cost $14m: Pentagon

'China might be interfering in talks'

WASHINGTON/BAGRAM, Afghanistan, July 10, (Agencies): President Donald Trump suggested on Monday that China might be seeking to derail US efforts aimed at denuclearizing North Korea, but said he was confident that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un would uphold a pact the two agreed last month.

In his first remarks about challenging diplomatic talks held at the weekend that sowed fresh doubts over North Korea's willingness to give up its nuclear arsenal, Trump said China "may be exerting negative pressure" in reaction to punitive US tariffs on Chinese goods.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reported progress from the first high-level talks since Trump and Kim met in Singapore, although he said a hard road lies ahead — North Korea accused him of "gangster-like" diplomacy after he left Pyongyang.

Following the June 12 Trump-Kim summit in which Kim made a broad agreement to "work toward denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula, Trump went on to say that North Korea was no longer a nuclear threat, even though no details were announced.

Pompeo went to Pyongyang aiming to "fill in" details of the agreement. On Monday, he said there were "many hours" of negotiations left.

"Now is the time for all of us, the State Department and others to deliver, to implement the agreement between President Trump and Chairman Kim," Pompeo told NATO troops at the end of a visit to Afghanistan.

"To think this would happen in the course of a handful of hours would have been ludicrous," Pompeo said.

The post-summit statements did not say how or when the reclusive state would dismantle its nuclear missile program that is believed to be capable of hitting the United States.

Leaked US intelligence findings have concluded that North Korea does not intend to give up its nuclear program completely.

A Twitter post by Trump in which he suggested that China might be spoiling North Korea talks was another twist in his rollercoaster approach to Beijing, a mix of praise and criticism, diplomatic outreach and outright aggression.

"I have confidence that Kim Jong Un will honor the contract we signed &, even more importantly, our handshake. We agreed to the denuclearization of North Korea," Trump said. "China, on the other hand, may be exerting negative pressure on a deal because of our posture on Chinese Trade-Hope Not!"

In Beijing on Tuesday, when asked about Trump's comments, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said, "First, China's position on the Korean peninsula issue is consistent. Second, China's attitude on the China-US trade issue is clear. Third, China is a trustworthy and responsible power."

She did not elaborate.

The administration worked for months to win China's support for its "maximum pressure" campaign of sanctions to isolate North Korea, which does most of its international trade with the Chinese.

Also:

WASHINGTON: When President **Donald Trump** announced the US would halt joint military drills with South Korea, he backed his controversial move by citing the "tremendous" costs of such exercises.

On Monday, the Pentagon put a dollar amount — about $14 million — on the costs of Freedom Guardian, a large-scale joint drill that was to kick off in August but which was shelved after Trump met with North Korean leader **Kim Jong Un** in a historic summit Singapore last month.

"We will be stopping the war games, which will save us a tremendous amount of money, unless and until we see the future negotiation is not going along like it should," Trump said after meeting Kim in a bid to solve the crisis over the North's nuclear weapons.

Trump later added on Twitter that the decision would "save a fortune."