

Volcano

Rescuers dig thru ash

27 still 'missing' as volcano toll hits 15

SUMBERWULUH, Indonesia, Dec 6, (AP): Rescuers dug out the body of 13-year-old boy with their bare hands on Monday, as improved weather conditions allowed them to resume their search after the highest volcano on Indonesia's Java island erupted with fury, killing at least 15 people with searing gas and ash and leaving 27 others missing.

Mount Semeru in Lumajang district in East Java province spewed thick columns of ash as high as 12,000 meters (40,000 feet) into the sky in a sudden eruption Saturday triggered by heavy rain. Villages and nearby towns were blanketed by tons of volcanic debris.

Searing gas raced down the sides of the mountain, smothering entire villages and killing or seriously burning those caught in its path.



Widodo

National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari said 56 people had been hospitalized, mostly with burns. He said rescuers were still searching for 27 villagers reported missing. Nearly 3,000 houses and 38 schools were damaged, Muhari said.

The body of the 13-year-old boy was recovered in the worst-hit village of Sumberwuluh, where houses were buried to their rooftops and cars were submerged. Crumpled roofs, charred carcasses of cattle and broken chairs covered in gray ash and soot dotted the smoldering landscape.

Search and rescue efforts were temporarily suspended Sunday afternoon because of fears that heavy rain would cause more hot ash and debris to fall from the crater.

The eruption of the 3,676-meter (12,060-foot)-high mountain eased pressure that had been building under a lava dome in the crater. But experts warned that the dome could further collapse, causing an avalanche of blistering gas and debris trapped beneath it.

More than 1,700 villagers escaped to makeshift emergency shelters after Saturday's powerful eruption, but many others defied official warnings and chose to remain in their homes to tend their livestock and protect their property.

Monitored

Semeru, also known as Mahameru, has erupted many times in the last 200 years. Still, as on many of the 129 volcanoes monitored in Indonesia, tens of thousands of people live on its fertile slopes. It last erupted in January, with no casualties.

Indonesia, an archipelago of more than 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of fault lines.

Authorities warned the thousands of people who fled the volcano's wrath not to return during Sunday's lull in activity. But some were desperate to check on livestock and possessions left behind. In several areas, everything — from the thinnest tree branch to couches and chairs inside homes — was caked with ash.

"There's no life there ... trees, farms, houses are scorched, everything is covered in heavy gray ash," said Haryadi Purnomo of East Java's search and rescue agency. He said that several other areas were virtually untouched.

Search and rescue efforts were temporary suspended on Sunday afternoon because of fears that hot ash and debris could tumble down from the crater due to heavy rains. On Saturday, a torrent of mud destroyed the main bridge connecting Lumajang and the neighboring district of Malang, as well as a smaller bridge.

The eruption eased pressure that had been building under a lava dome perched on the crater. But experts warned that the dome could still further collapse, causing an avalanche of the blistering gas and debris trapped beneath it.

A thunderstorm and days of rain, which eroded and partly collapsed the dome atop the 3,676-meter (12,060-foot) Semeru, triggered the eruption, said Eko Budi Lelono, who heads the geological survey center.

Semeru, the stratovolcano in shape of a cone, is also known as Mahameru, meaning "The Great Mountain" in Sanskrit. It has erupted many times over the last 200 years. Still, as with other volcanoes — it is one of 129 under watch in Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago — more than 62,000 people call Semeru's fertile slopes home. It last erupted in January, with no casualties.

Indonesia, an archipelago of more than 270 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of fault lines. Currently 54% of the country's population live on Java, the country's most densely populated area.

Officials said earlier they had hoped they could avoid casualties by closely monitoring the volcano.

National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari said 56 people had been hospitalized, mostly with burns. He said rescuers were still searching for nine residents of Curah Kobokan village.

More than 1,300 villagers streamed into makeshift emergency shelters after Saturday's powerful eruption, but many others defied official warnings and chose to remain in their homes, saying they had to tend to their livestock and protect their property, said Purnomo.

"We'll do everything we can to evacuate them by preparing trucks and motorbikes for them to flee at any time," he said.

Response

Indonesian President **Joko Widodo** said he instructed his Cabinet ministers and disaster and military officials to coordinate the response. The government pledged to relocate residents from hardest-hit villages to safer places in the next six months and to provide 500,000 rupiah (\$34.50) per month in compensation for each family while waiting for new houses.

Mount Semeru's eruption in Lumajang district in East Java province left several villages blanketed with falling ash.

A thunderstorm and days of rain, which had eroded and finally collapsed the lava dome atop the 3,676-meter (12,060-foot) Semeru, triggered an eruption, said Eko Budi Lelono, who heads the geological survey center.

He said flows of searing gas and lava traveled up to 800 meters (2,624 feet) to a nearby river at least twice on Saturday. People were advised to stay 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) from the crater's mouth, the agency said.

"Thick columns of ash have turned several villages to darkness," said Lumajang district head Thoriqul Haq. Several hundred people were moved to temporary shelters or left for other safe areas, he said, adding that power blackout hampered the evacuation.

The debris and lava mixed with the rainfall formed thick mud that destroyed the main bridge connecting Lumajang and the neighboring district of Malang, as well as a smaller bridge, Haq said.

Despite an increase in activity since Wednesday, Semeru's alert status has remained at the third highest of four levels since it began erupting last year, and Indonesia's volcanology Center for Geological Hazard Mitigation did not raise it this week, Lelono said.

One man died from severe burns, and 41 others were hospitalized with burn injuries, said Indah Masdar, the deputy district head. She said two villagers were reported missing and several sand miners were trapped in isolated areas along the village river.

Entire houses in Curah Kobokan village were damaged by volcanic debris, Masdar said.

Television reports showed people screaming and running under a huge ash cloud, their faces wet from rain mixed with volcanic dust. The last time Semeru erupted in January, there were no casualties.



A village is covered in ash from the eruption of Mount Semeru in Lumajang district, East Java province, Indonesia, Monday, Dec. 6. (AP)

Coronavirus

Putin hopes WHO soon approves Sputnik V vaccine

'Next pandemic may be worse'

LONDON, Dec 6, (AP): One of the scientists behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine is warning that the next pandemic may be more contagious and more lethal unless more money is devoted to research and preparations to fight emerging viral threats.

In excerpts released ahead of a speech Monday, Prof. Sarah Gilbert says the scientific advances made in fighting deadly viruses "must not be lost" due to the cost of fighting the current pandemic.

"This will not be the last time a virus threatens our lives and our livelihoods," Gilbert is expected to say. "The truth is, the next one could be worse. It could be more contagious, or more lethal, or both."

Gilbert is scheduled to make the remarks Monday night when she delivers this year's Richard Dimbleby lecture, named after the late broadcaster who was the BBC's first war correspondent and a pioneer of television news in Britain. The annual televised lecture features addresses by influential figures in business, science and government.

Gilbert is set to call on governments to redouble their commitment to scientific research and pandemic preparedness, even after the threat of COVID-19 wanes.

"We cannot allow a situation where we have gone through all we have gone through, and then find that the enormous economic losses we have sustained mean that there is still no funding for pandemic preparedness," she said. "The advances we have made, and the knowledge we have gained, must not be lost."

Supplies

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday voiced hope for a quick approval of the country's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine by the World Health Organization, saying the move is essential to expand its global supplies.

Speaking during a video call with Francesco Rocca, president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Putin said receiving the WHO's vetting is necessary to spread the Russian vaccine more broadly around the world, including free supplies.

"We intend to expand such assistance," Putin said.

The Russian leader also argued that WHO's approval should open the door for Russians and others who have had the Sputnik V vaccine to travel more freely around the world. He said about

200 million people worldwide have received Sputnik V.

Putin was vaccinated with Sputnik V in the spring, and last month he received a booster shot of Sputnik Light, the one-dose version. He also said he took an experimental nasal version of Sputnik V days after receiving his booster shot, adding that he was feeling fine and felt no side effects.

The Gamaleya Institute that developed Sputnik V has said the vaccine should be efficient against the omicron variant of COVID-19, but announced that it will immediately start working on adapting it to counter the new variant.

Russia was the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vaccine, launching Sputnik V in August 2020, and has plentiful supplies. But uptake has been slow, blamed in part on conflicting signals from Russian authorities.

time of the year — while allowing those who are vaccinated go about life more or less as usual.

Italy's vaccination rate is higher than many of its neighbors, at 85% of the eligible population aged 12 and older and 77% of the total population. But people in their 30s, 40s and 50s have proved the most reluctant to get vaccinated, with nearly 3.5 million still not having received their first doses.

They are also the same age group that is now being hardest hit by the virus, according to Silvio Brusaferrero, head of Italy's National Health Institute.

Also starting Monday, people must have a health pass to access local public transportation and stay in hotels — that can be acquired also with a negative recent test. In Milan, the prefect said health passes will be checked before people are allowed onto the subway or buses.

With the holiday shopping season heating up, many cities including Rome and Milan have ordered mask mandates even outdoors.

Public health officials say vaccinations, along with prudent public behavior including wearing masks in crowds, are key to reducing infection levels as winter weather pushes more activities indoors.

Russia in recent months has faced its deadliest and largest surge of coronavirus cases, with infections and deaths climbing to all-time highs and only slowing in the last few weeks. Russia has Europe's highest confirmed pandemic death toll at over 281,000, according to the government's coronavirus task force. But a report released Friday by the state statistics agency Rosstat, which uses broader criteria, put the overall number of virus-linked deaths between April 2020 and October 2021 to over 537,000 — almost twice the official toll.

Putin, who despite a surge in infections in Russia has repeatedly argued that vaccinations should remain voluntary, emphasized Sunday that Russian authorities have been tried to use "persuasion and not pressure" and worked to dispel "prejudices and myths driving the aversion to vaccination."



Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert on June 11, 2021. In excerpts released ahead of a speech Monday Dec. 6, Prof. Sarah Gilbert, one of the scientists behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, is warning that the next pandemic may be more contagious and more lethal unless more money is devoted to research and preparations to fight emerging viral threats. (AP)



Vercammen



Gustavsen

Discovery

Iron Age longhouses found: Norwegian archaeologists said Monday they have found a cluster of longhouses, including one of the largest in Scandinavia, using ground-penetrating radar in the southeastern part of the country — in an area that researchers believe was a central place in the late Nordic Iron Age.

The longhouses — long and narrow, single-room buildings — were found in Gjelstad, 86 kilometers (53 miles) southeast of Oslo near where a Viking-era ship was found in 2018 close to the Swedish border.

"We have found several buildings, all typical Iron Age longhouses, north of the Gjelstad ship. The most striking discovery is a 60-meter (197-foot) long and 15-meter (49-foot) wide longhouse, a size that makes it one of the largest we know of in Scandinavia," archaeologist **Lars Gustavsen** at Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research said in a statement.

The importance of Gjelstad during that time period wasn't immediately known. But the body, known by its Norwegian acronym NIKU, said it was working on finding that out.

This autumn, archaeologists covered 40 hectares (about 100 acres) south, east and north of where the Gjelstad ship was found with the radar system, and one of the next steps are archaeological excavations, NIKU said.

The surveys are the first part of a research project called "Viking Nativity: Gjelstad Across Borders" where archaeologists, historians and Viking age specialists have examined the development of the area during the Iron Age that began at around 500 B.C. and lasted until approximately A.D. 800 and the beginning of the Viking Age. (AP)

Hawaii mountains to see snow: The National Weather Service has issued a blizzard warning for mountains on Hawaii's Big Island, saying wind gusts of above 100 mph (160 kph) and 12 inches (30.4 centimeters) or more of snow were possible.

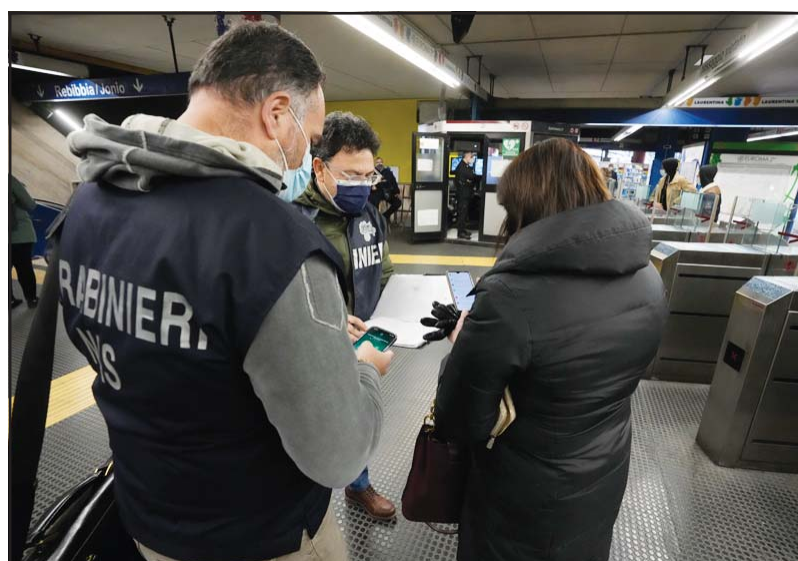
The warning in effect through Sunday morning for Big Island summits said "travel should be restricted to emergencies only" and those who must travel should have a winter survival kit.

Blizzard warnings for Hawaii are rare, but not unheard of. The Big Island has mountain peaks that reach nearly 14,000 feet (more than 4,200 meters). CNN reported that the last blizzard warning issued by the National Weather Service

in Hawaii was more than three and half years ago.

The threat of snow in Hawaii comes

as places in the Rocky Mountains more used to white wintery weather are close to breaking records for days without snow.



Carabinieri policemen check the green health pass of public transportation passengers in Rome, Monday, Dec. 6, on the first day a super green health pass went into effect. Italian police can check whether diners in restaurants or bars have a "super" green health pass certifying that they are either vaccinated or have recently recovered from the virus. (AP)

Denver's high temperature Wednesday hit 73 degrees Fahrenheit (23 degrees Celsius), tying the record set in 1973. (AP)

2 hippos have COVID-19: A Belgian zoo said that a pair of hippopotamuses in its care are in isolation after testing positive for COVID-19, possibly the first time ever such animals have caught the disease.

Belgium's national veterinary lab has confirmed that Antwerp Zoo's two hippos — Imani, aged 14, and 41-year-old Hermien — contracted COVID-19. It's unclear how they caught it. Both the giant semiaquatic herbivores are well, apart from exceptionally runny noses. Keepers have tightened virus restrictions around the zoo.

"To my knowledge, it's the first recorded contamination among this species. Throughout the world this virus has mostly been seen in great apes and felines," Antwerp Zoo vet **Francis Vercammen** said.

How the hippos got the disease remains a mystery. All the zoo's animals were tested for COVID-19 last year and no case was found. Hippos normally tend to be wet, but Vercammen said he decided to test the thick liquid coming out as a precaution, and was surprised by the result. (AP)